

THREE CONTEMPORARY KOREAN ARTISTS

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Abstract

This thesis examines the work of three Korean contemporary art practitioners: Lee Ufan (b. 1936), Lee Bul (b.1964) and the collective flyingCity (formed 2001). Lee Ufan is a senior Korean sculptor, painter and writer, who, during a long and productive career, has been based in Tokyo and Paris, and is now recognised in Korea, as well as internationally. Both Lee Bul and flyingCity have participated in projects at the Govett-Brewster Gallery for Contemporary Art in New Plymouth, New Zealand.

These three art practices demonstrate a trend during the last fifty years from the individual artist working in a studio (Lee Ufan), to the artist moving from city to city making and showing artworks (Lee Bul), to artist collectives, working with community groups in the mode of relational aesthetics (flyingCity).

Note to the reader on Korean names

For East Asian names I have used the order of family name first, followed by given name, except where the writer or artist is widely published using the Western order.

Korean given names are usually made of two ‘characters,’ but can vary between one (e.g. Lee Bul) and, much less commonly, up to four or five.

There are no particular rules for the form or spelling of an English rendition of a Korean name. Sometimes the given name is written as one word and sometimes as two and the use of a capital letter for the last part also varies (e.g. Jeon Yongseouk or Jeon Yong Seouk). A hyphen is sometimes used, although hyphens may be prohibited on official documents (e.g. Jeon Yong-Seouk or Jeon Yong-seouk).

I have tried as far as possible to follow the preference of individuals, as expressed by recent publications.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines Korean contemporary art by focusing on three artistic practices. The narrative begins after the Korean War, and after the partition of Korea into North and South. The artists are Lee Ufan (b. 1936), Lee Bul (b. 1964) and the collective flyingCity (formed 2001).

Lee Ufan practises as an individual artist, addressing painterly and sculptural problems, as well as being a writer and theorist of contemporary art. The forms of his work also have roots in the traditional art of Korea. His practice spans from 1967 to the present day. He has been based in Tokyo and Paris. Lee Bul is a generation younger, graduating from art school in 1987, and sustaining and reinventing her practice for over two decades. Through both performance and fabricated objects she addresses issues of social significance and explores utopian themes. She is based in Seoul, but exhibits in cities across the USA, Europe and Asia. The collective flyingCity are also based in Seoul, and Seoul is both the subject and the context of their work, which opens out into direct involvement in society.

The thesis traces the movement away from the traditional role of the artist, working apart from everyday life and producing objects to be viewed as art, towards an emphasis on an encounter between artists, subjects and viewers.¹ It is a description of artistic practice in Korea during the last 40 years,² which has many confluences with worldwide changes in artistic practice during that time period. However, for historic reasons, the timeline of artistic practice in Korea is not directly parallel with those of the Western world, nor its neighbours Japan and China.

There was, of course, a hiatus in cultural activity in Europe during the Second World War and the years immediately following, but for Koreans

¹ In addition to the situation of an individual artist working in a studio, in the literati tradition of Korea and China art practice was not an isolated activity, but rather a lively social interaction between scholar artists and engagement with their works of art.

² This thesis deals only with South Korean artists and references to 'Korea' after 1953 should be understood as 'South Korea.'

there had already been a much longer period of hardship under the Japanese occupation of 1910 – 1945. During that time there was not only economic deprivation but also the deliberate suppression of Korean identity and culture and any form of political dissent. This intensified during World War II and was then succeeded in the post-war period by American military control.³

The even more tragic sequel was the Korean Civil War, 1950 – 1953. After the cease-fire and the establishment of the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea, there were faltering steps towards American-style democracy. Then, in 1961, the ‘May 16 Coup’ began the rule of Park Chung-Hee, hardening into dictatorship by his third term. Park drove through the industrialization and modernization of South Korea, leading to its emergence as an economic ‘Asian Tiger’.

From the 1970s, until the economic crash of 1997, there was an extraordinary movement of people from countryside to city. Approximately half of the population of South Korea now lives in or near Seoul.⁴ Ancestral villages are maintained by grandparents; visited on special occasions. Under the post-war dictators, villages were forced to modernize, by organizations such as the *Saemaul Undong* (New Community Movement). Signs of those changes were the disappearance of thatched roofs or the traditional men’s tall horsehair hats.⁵ The cities were built and rebuilt, and urban freeways obliterated traditional neighbourhoods. Shoddy construction of the 1960s was torn down and replaced. Despite personal hardship, Korean artists have often assumed the role of commentators on these changes in society and in the built environment.

³ Rediscovery and preservation of treasures took place under US military control, for example the cooperative efforts of Sherman E. Lee (Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1958 – 1983), while in the US military, with Kim Chewon, the founding director of the Korean National Museum of Art (Director 1945 – 1970) and author of *Arts of Korea*, 1974.

⁴ Mercedes Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action* (New Plymouth and Seoul: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Insa Art Space of the Arts Council of Korea, 2008). 90.

⁵ Simon Winchester, *Korea: A Walk through the Land of Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988). 215-6.

There have been large-scale government initiatives to promote public art in Korea. The 1988 Olympic Games provided motivation for spending public monies to prepare for the influx of visitors.⁶ For example, the Seoul underground train system was constructed, with all signage in both English and Korean, and Art Decoration Laws were implemented, with a percentage of building budgets being earmarked for the acquisition of artworks such as public sculptures. Because funding was from conservative bodies these artworks were usually in the current mainstream style of Modernism, open to criticism by the more avant-garde art community as mere decoration of the buildings. Ambitious public art projects have been promoted by local governments, such as the Anyang Public Art Projects in a new satellite city near Seoul.⁷

Alongside official projects were new, radical types of art in public places, pursuing activist ideals and social engagement. During the 1970s performance art emerged. This was perceived as resistance to the establishment and performance artists were sometimes rounded up by the police on charges of sedition, which had the effect of encouraging 'the spirit of radical avant-garde.'⁸ In the 1980s the Minjung art movement (People's Art, *minjoong misool*), criticised the rulers in power at that time and by the arousal of public opinion helped to bring about change and democratization. From the 1990s there has been a rise in artist collectives. These collectives are fluid combinations of artists - forming, dissolving and reforming – with individuals contributing their various skills, such as filmmaking or music. Collectives are often particularly concerned with social and political issues, with selection for group shows commonly based on their political relevance. Among Korean artists, as with artists in other countries, there has been a

⁶ Lim Young Bang , "The Evolution and Development of Contemporary Korean Art," *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993). 143.

⁷ Emily Pethick, "Anyang Public Art Project," *frieze* 2008. There are works by Lee Bul, flyingCity and Minouk Lim in public parks in Anyang. FlyingCity's Maze Tower playground was designed around their research into children's perceptions and movements in public space.

⁸ Jae-Ryung Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art* (St. Leonards, NSW: Craftsman House, 2001). 72.

rise in video and sound works, alongside the continued production of object-based art. The 'demolition' of genres has continued.⁹

1995 is an important date for Korean contemporary art, marking the inauguration of the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.¹⁰ The first Gwangju Biennale was also held in 1995: this was the earliest Asian contemporary art international biennale. Gwangju is significant as the scene of the May 1980 pro-democracy student demonstrations, following the assassination of President Park and a military coup d'état. This uprising was violently suppressed, with hundreds of civilians killed,¹¹ but was a turning point for the democracy movement in South Korea.¹²

From around 2000 some artists' groups, such as flyingCity, have worked in direct social engagement with local communities, building relationships with the residents and focusing on the local environment. Such collectives might initiate community events, such as a workshop considering urban planning by means of art-making, or street theatre, with associated documentation by photography or video. Many members of these groups had previously been part of the Minjung movement. Therefore, these current activist art practices are associated by many people with the Minjung, although that was characterized by figurative painting.

In Korea the grim problems of the previous generations – colonialization, war, poverty and life under dictatorship – were replaced by materialism, globalization and intergenerational friction. During the economic boom of the 1980s there was an exponential increase in support for the arts from both government and private corporations, funding art schools, galleries and art

⁹ Lim, "The Evolution and Development of Contemporary Korean Art." 146.

¹⁰ Jae-Ryung Roe, "Encountering the World: The Past and the Present," *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, ed. Apinan Poshyanandra (New York: Asian Society Galleries, 1996). 98 – 99.

¹¹ Estimates vary of the numbers killed, from two to hundreds to 2,000 people; for example, the account of 'the Kwongju Incident' in Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Modern Korea: from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). 189.

¹² Vicente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 76.

journals.¹³ There was an easing of restrictions on freedom of expression compared to life under dictatorship, but there was still, inevitably, control from the older generation holding the purse strings. The institutions, such as art schools and galleries, held the roles of promoting art and distributing funding, but young artists from those institutions often moved into music clubs and places where they could escape the control of their elders.

An example of this trend is Choi Jeong-hwa, an emerging artist in the 1980s, of the same generation as Lee Bul. He is known for his brightly coloured sculptures, but while continuing to produce object art, he also moved into the decoration and creation of atmosphere in music clubs in the 1990s. He also works outside Korea and his skills were engaged at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Zealand for the design of the exhibition space for *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*, 2007, and in particular the creation of the Insa Art Space Lounge.¹⁴ He has participated in Christchurch's SCAPE Biennial of Art in Public Space (*Happy Happy*, 2006), and was also commissioned by the Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tāmaki, to make two installations to celebrate the opening of the new wing of the gallery in 2011 (*Flower Chandelier*, 2011, and *Red*, 2011).

Korea has had a long history of isolation and homogeneity, repelling invaders or traders and presenting twentieth-century tourists with an image of calm seclusion as the 'Hermit Kingdom.' Also, unlike its larger neighbours China and Japan, Korea has not been the subject of any periods of Western fascination with East Asian aesthetics. When Simon Winchester walked the length of South Korea in 1987, he was struck by an unusual tendency to think alike, which he ascribed to this Korean history.¹⁵ FlyingCity also comment on 'the pervasiveness of Korean collective culture,' believing this to be the reason for the failure to flourish of the

¹³ Lim, "The Evolution and Development of Contemporary Korean Art." 143.

¹⁴ Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 140 – 145.

¹⁵ Winchester, *Korea: A Walk through the Land of Miracles*. 245.

avant-garde of the eighties.¹⁶ Now this homogeneity has fractured and Koreans travel, work and exchange ideas around the world, and are noted for their enthusiasm for new technology and communication.¹⁷ There has also been an influx of foreign workers living on the margins of Korean society. A number of artists have drawn attention to this and worked to make the migrant workers more visible.

East Asian art specialist Joan Kee uses the term ‘oscillation’ to describe artists who move back and forth between ‘disparate geographical locations,’ for example Seoul and New York. She argues that this practice of ‘oscillation’ blurs market driven categories such as ‘Korean-ness’ and ‘tears asunder the deep privileging of problematic tropes such as authenticity and indigeneity.’¹⁸ She identifies several different problems in commenting on the work of Korean artists: ethnicity or nationality should be neither seen as a prescriptive imperative for artists to exert themselves, nor as the primary categorization or explanation of the meaning of their work, while on the other hand the artist should not be seen solely as a rootless individual, ignoring his or her ‘engagement with the space of Korea.’

To illustrate her point, Kee uses the examples of two Korean artists, Suh Doho and Oh Inhwon. Suh moves between New York and Seoul, living and exhibiting in both cities. He has made meticulously detailed fabric replicas of both his home in Seoul and his apartment in New York. In each he recreates ‘the feeling of home,’ which is particularly important in the context of the dislocations of Korean history. This is, however, not only a ‘Korean’ feeling, but also a universal experience. Suh’s works have been installed in galleries in both cities and in other key galleries, such as Tate Modern in London. Oh demands the viewer’s effort in engaging with his subtle and complex works. He introduces Korean elements, such as Korean

¹⁶ flyingCity, *Urbanism Research Group Web Site*, flyingCity. 29/03/2012.

¹⁷ Kim Youngna, "Urban Space and Visual Culture: The Transformation of Seoul in the Twentieth Century," *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, ed. Rebecca M. & Deborah S. Hutton Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011). 175.

¹⁸ Joan Kee, "Some Thoughts on the Practice of Oscillation," *Third Text* 17.2 (2003). 144

script (*hangeul*) and incense, but refuses to either ‘completely embrace or sever himself from the specificity of a Korean context.’¹⁹ Kee suggests a formal reading of Oh’s work, rather than ‘the quasi-anthropological approach commonly used for works produced by artists who happen to be Asian.’²⁰ She considers that ‘the Korean/non-Korean dichotomy peculiarly endemic to discussions of what is considered as contemporary Korean art is highly suspect.’²¹



Figure 1 Suh Do-ho, *seoul home/seoul home*, from exhibition, *Home within Home*, Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, 2012.

In this thesis, my approach is to look at each artist as an individual contemporary art practitioner, rather than as an example of ‘Korean-ness.’ However, each artist is a child of his or her particular nation and the history

¹⁹ Kee, "Some Thoughts on the Practice of Oscillation." 148.

²⁰ Ibid. 147.

²¹ Ibid.

and culture of that nation, so the resulting art is inevitably coloured by traditions and memories.

Lee Ufan, the earliest of the artists discussed in this thesis, started his career at a time when the effects of the stifling of new art movements in Korea, under Japanese colonization, were still being felt. Ironically, Korean modern and contemporary art came into being via Japan, because Korean artists were educated there, and because the reviving Japanese economy enabled more active public interest in art.²² Lee Ufan moved to Tokyo in 1956, attended university there, and was able to observe and become part of the development of the Japanese equivalents to Western Modernism and Post-Modernism. In the early 1970s Minimalist painting expanded in Korea and was greeted by enthusiasm in Japan. The exhibition *Five Korean artists, Five Kinds of White* at the Tokyo Gallery in 1975, initiated public discussion of monochromatic Minimalist painting. In 1977 'An Aspect of Korean Modern Art,' at the Central Museum in Tokyo, was, in Jae-Ryung Roe's words, 'lauded by Japanese art critics as a fresh new wave of modern abstraction in the Far East, and won critical acclaim in Japan as a uniquely native Korean variant of Minimalism.'²³

The development of Korean art practice accelerated in the 1980s and 90s and has become more temporally aligned with Western art movements. Lee Bul, graduating from art school in 1987, involved herself in feminist and performance art, similar in many respects to the art produced during the 1970s in London and New York. She was energetic in arranging to work and exhibit in many cities in Europe and the USA. The artists of the flyingCity collective are of the same generation as Lee Bul. They were active as a collective in the 2000s and their community-based projects were in concert with global art practice of that time. Korean art in the last sixty years has had a burden of 'catching up,' but now operates alongside Western contemporary art.

²² Lim, "The Evolution and Development of Contemporary Korean Art." 139.

²³ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 39.

Today there are multiplicities of alternative ways for artists to practice. No longer is the individual artist in his studio, like Lee Ufan, the only model. Making of objects is mixed with performance and viewer participation, as in the work of Lee Bul. Her practice involves teams of specialist fabricators and technicians. It is becoming more and more usual for artists to move around the world as artists in residence and participants in Biennales.²⁴ Some artists continue to make objects, while others work on assemblage or installation and others, often collectives, work in the community, creating art that is unashamedly interwoven with social and political activity. The artists chosen for study in this thesis represent this variety of artistic practice.

The three art practices examined are respected in Korea and on the international stage. Lee Ufan and Lee Bul impress with their sustained productivity and progression of ideas over decades, continuing to produce reflective work. The members of the collectives regenerate their art through their regroupings. These particular artists are all exceptionally articulate, acting as their own theorists. They all have excellent knowledge of Western art history (a characteristic rarely reciprocated) and are aware of questions of cross-cultural understanding. Each expects to take part in discussion and debate. Study of these individual practices cannot give a comprehensive view of contemporary Korean art, but does tell some parts of the story; mapping a trajectory from 1960s Minimalism to art of the twenty-first century and developing utopian themes and projections for the future of cities.

²⁴ Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, *Installation Art in the New Millenium* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003). 107.

Research Sources

As a starting point, background on Korean history and art was found in Jane Portal's British Museum book, *Korea: Art and Archaeology* (2000). A helpful overview of Korean history and culture was gleaned from Simon Winchester's book, *Korea: A Walk Through the Land Of Miracles* (1988).

In *Contemporary Korean Art* (2001) Jae-Ryung Roe provides an introduction to Lee Ufan and Lee Bul. In her forward, Roe makes the point that, although since the mid 1980s Korean artists were actively and aggressively exhibiting internationally, and although there was abundant debate and art-writing within Korea, at that time, because of the language barrier, international art publications or conferences lacked critical analysis of Korean contemporary art. She comments that there were only a few English-language essays in exhibition catalogues or marginally in art publications. Her book was written with the purpose of providing information to readers outside Korea.²⁵ This contrast in the availability of English-language information and analysis before and after 2001 is reflected in my Bibliography.

For Chapter One an important source was Silke von Berswordt's published doctoral thesis, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other* (2007), in which she examines individual works in depth, with the goal of bringing that artist's work to the proper attention of Western critics. Much information and analysis was found in a paper by Joan Kee, 'Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan' (2008). Interviews with Lee Ufan by Edan Corkill in *The Japan Times Online* from 2010 provided lively insights into the artist's life and approach to his work.

Alexandra Munroe's classic book, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (1994) contains a helpful account of the *Mono-ha* movement. Michele Mara's books, *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* and *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader*, are sources on Japanese aesthetics,

²⁵ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 7 – 8.

and Gao Jianping's, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art: From Calligraphy to Painting*, expounds the Chinese concept of expression through calligraphy.

The artist's own writings on his own and other art, from the 1960s to the mid-2000s, in particular those collected in *Lee Ufan: the Art of Encounter*, were illuminating and a pleasure to read during the research process. The principal translator into English of Lee Ufan's writings was Stanley N. Anderson.

The exhibition *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity* was held at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, from June to September 2011. The book accompanying the exhibition, edited by Munroe, was published at the end of 2011 and is a comprehensive account of Lee Ufan's career.

For research on Lee Bul, in Chapter Two, there are many publications, particularly books accompanying exhibitions, produced by the galleries involved; many edited by the artist herself. These include essays on various aspects of the work and some interviews with the artist. There are also many critical essays in art journals, with Art Asia Pacific being a rich source.

The New Zealand Govett-Brewster Gallery hosted Lee Bul as an artist-in-residence in 2005, marking the exhibition with a book. This led me to apply for an 'earthquake grant' from the University of Canterbury to fund a visit to New Plymouth, and I spent two days there in May 2011. Gallery Director Rhana Devenport graciously gave me time in her busy schedule and provided helpful insights on all three chapters. Her previous appointment had been at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, where she was involved with the Asia-Pacific Triennial 2002 when Lee Ufan was one of the specially invited senior artists. At the Govett-Brewster she had directed Mercedes Vicente to curate the exhibition *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action* (2007). Discussion with Vicente during my two days in New Plymouth led to my choice of the collective flyingCity as the subject of Chapter Three and Devenport also offered helpful pointers on the various Korean artists who had participated in that show.

The Govett-Brewster still holds the original installation, *Mon grand récit: because everything...* (2005), made by Lee Bul during her residency. It is in three parts, carefully dis-assembled and wrapped in clear plastic in the basement workshop and storage area. The process of creating this work was brought to life by conversation with Brian James (Fabrication and Exhibition team leader) about its construction and installation.

For the third chapter, the book *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action* (2008) was a rich source of information, but otherwise flyingCity was primarily researched on websites. There the writing of Jeon Yongseok can be found, along with illustrations of flyingCity's work with communities in Seoul. Mark Kremer provides a helpful overview in his article, *See Seoul, Then Die: The flyngCity Experience* (2004), on the flyingCity website. The research on the Situationists was initially done through on-line journals, followed up with readings in the anthologies and translations by Charles Grey (1974) and Ken Knabb (2006).

CHAPTER ONE: LEE UFAN

The Man in the Middle.

I was born in Korea, and raised there until I was 20. After that, I lived in Japan for 40 years. During the last 30 years, I have spent a lot of time travelling around the world, mostly in Europe. Because of this background, Koreans see me as being Japanized, the Japanese see me as being fundamentally Korean, and when I go to Europe, people set me aside as an Oriental. I see myself as a ping-pong ball, the man in the middle, always being pushed back and forth with no one willing to accept me as an insider.²⁶

Lee Ufan 1991-1996

When Lee Ufan was embarking on his career as an artist, in the 1960s, Korea was still suffering the effects of 40 years of colonization by the Japanese and two world wars, followed by the Korean Civil War, leaving the country devastated in every way. For artist families the struggle to obtain the basic necessities of life had to come before materials or time for making art. The nation had to rebuild and find ways forward, economically as well as culturally.

In the visual arts Korea stood at a crossroads. There were the ways of traditional Korean art and crafts. Then there were the two routes allowed during the colonial period: these were traditional Japanese art, or the ‘modernization’ promoted by the Japanese, understood as Western methods. However, for Koreans there was also the possibility of another route. This was a path that Lee Ufan was exceptionally well positioned to map out; by his background and his personality, by his self-appointed training in

²⁶ Lee Ufan, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*, trans. Stanley N. Anderson (London: Lisson Gallery, 2008). 17.

philosophy and art, by his preferences in ways of thinking about art, and by his attitude to 'the viewer.'

Well versed in philosophy and art history, Lee Ufan was in a position to comment on and develop an alternative to the Western narrative. He offered a direction away from non-Western artists being treated as peripheral and thus played a significant role in establishing Korea's place in the globalization of art.²⁷ His desire was for a world free of hierarchy or authoritarianism.²⁸ His critique of Modernism initially contributed to the development of the Korean Monochrome movement, *dansaekhwa*, and in the longer term paved the way for Korean contemporary art; different from both Japanese Modernism and Western Modernism.

Born in the town of Haman, in south-eastern Korea, in 1936,²⁹ as a child Lee Ufan received training in traditional Korean poetry, calligraphy and painting. The family home was in a rural, mountainous area. They were a politically active family and Lee's grandfather had been involved in the Independence movement. His father was a journalist, sometimes working abroad.³⁰ In 1956 Lee began studying art at the Seoul National University, but in the same year abruptly moved to Tokyo and enrolled at the less prestigious Nihon University, to study philosophy with a special interest in the works of Martin Heidegger.³¹ His interests ranged across both European and Eastern philosophy. Graduating in 1961, he supported himself as a painter, while also writing and experimenting in music and theatre. He had given himself an excellent preparation to be 'the man in the middle.'

²⁷ Alexandra Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity* (New York: Guggenheim, 2011). 32 note 8. Munroe comments that the term 'international contemporaneity' was coined by critic Haryū in the late 1960s and adopted by scholar Reiko Tomii, as a way to theorize how art could be nationally distinct yet have international relevance.

²⁸ Joan Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan," *Oxford Art Journal* 31.3 (2008). 405.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 410.

³⁰ Edan Corkill, "Korean at the Forefront of Japan's Modern Art," *The Japan Times Online* (2010). Interview with Lee Ufan.

³¹ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 411.

Lee's career can be considered in three aspects. First is his role as a writer, starting from his time as a principal theorist for the *Mono-ha* movement in Japan (late 1960s to early 1970s) and the publication in 1971 of a collection of his essays titled, *In Search of Encounter*.³² Then, arising from his theoretical work, came his activity as a sculptor, in particular the *Relatum* series. The third aspect is his work as a painter and professor of fine art, in both Japan and France. His series of sculptures and paintings were made over a time scale of decades and, along with his writings, can be seen as a commentary on both Eastern and Western art and philosophy. His work stands at the crossroads between traditional and contemporary and between East and West and opened the way for following generations of artists.

When Lee started his career in Tokyo in the 1960s there was a spirit of a fresh internationalism.³³ He wrote that 'The Mono-ha has nothing to do with Japanism or Orientalism.' He saw the making of art as 'mutual recognition of otherness between all forms of existence.' This experience could be a universal, transcending national or cultural boundaries. For example, Lee rejoiced in signs of Chinese artists in the 1990s engaging with the outside world and African artists making manifest 'the unknown, uncertain, and invisible worlds of nature and death.'³⁴

Lee has been part of many significant international exhibitions, including an exhibition on the *Mono-ha* at the Guggenheim in 1974, the Tate Liverpool exhibition *Contemporary Art from Korea* in 1992, and a solo exhibition at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. In 2010 a permanent exhibition of his work was installed at Naoshima Island, Kagawa, Japan. A retrospective of his work was held at the Guggenheim New York in 2011, curated by Alexandra Munroe.

³² Some of these essays were initially published in 1969, then published as a collection titled *Deai o motomete: Atarashii geijutsu no hajimari ni* [In search of encounter: At the dawn of a new art], (Tokyo: Tabata shoten, 1971). A revised edition was re-titled, *Deai o motomete: Gendai bijutsu no shigen* [in search of encounter: The beginnings of contemporary art], (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 2000).

³³ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 20.

³⁴ Ibid. 121.

The vitality of Mono-ha shares ... a "regeneration of a dismembered culture;" it is thus no coincidence that they share the goal "to create a work that offers no definite solution and that does not arrogantly presume to represent something definite; all it has is the extreme difficulty and the extreme pleasure of existing."

*Germano Celant 1991*³⁵

From 1968 Lee Ufan, based in Tokyo, was associated with the group of artists known as the *Mono-ha*, the 'School of Things'. His writings of that time, such as *In Search of Encounter*, constructed the theoretical basis for the movement. At the same time he started making sculptures and installations, combining industrial and natural materials. In the early 1970s his work began to be exhibited more widely in Japan, Korea and Europe.³⁶ At the 1971 Biennale de Paris, Lee represented Korea and, along with the participating Japanese artists, introduced the concept of *Mono-ha* to the European art-world.

The late 1960s were a time of student protest around the world, against the ruling establishment in each country and against American influence worldwide. In Japan there were rigid systems of art education and of art associations controlling exhibitions. The establishment promoted Western style Modernism and the celebration of technological progress. Looking back to an earlier generation, Munroe argues that the *Zen'ei bijutsu*, the avant-garde of the Taisho era (1912 – 1926), opposed 'entrenched systems of nationalism' in Japan and the 'hegemony of Euro-American modernism

³⁵ Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). 268. Munroe quotes Germano Celant, "Euroamerica: from Minimal Art to Arte Povera" in *Breakthroughs: Avant-garde Artists in Europe and America, 1950–1990*, exhibition catalogue (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1991). 121.

³⁶ Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*, trans. Michael E. Foster (Gottingen: Steidl, 2007). 203. Chronology.

worldwide,' rather than being specifically anti-bourgeois, as in Europe.³⁷ Commenting on the waves of avant-garde movements, both pre-war and post-war, Monroe suggests that what is often seen as anti-Western is better understood as resistance to the outright adoption of Euro-American culture and the need for Japan to 'construct its own distinct modernity.'³⁸ *Mono-ha* was a fresh avant-garde, opening the way for *gendai bijutsu*: contemporary art.

Mono-ha artists were mainly graduates of the Tama Art University, working in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The group existed for about five years, had no manifesto and held no exhibitions, but 'shared a radical interest in the issues of perception, nature, and art-making.'³⁹ The *Mono-ha* movement criticized Modernism and sought to illuminate the inter-relationship between man-made materials and unmade materials through visual art.⁴⁰ *Mono-ha* works were mainly temporary and ephemeral. They exist in photographic documentation or artists' reconstructions. Although the movement was short-lived, it effected a paradigm shift in post-war Japanese art and was a continuing influence on Japanese art during the following decades. As a writer as well as a practising artist, Lee Ufan was a key member of the group, along with Suga Kishio (b. 1944, graduated Tama Art University 1968).

In the context of modernization in Japan, which was resisted and criticized as alienating the self from nature, *Mono-ha* artists looked to the schools of Buddhist and Daoist metaphysics as sources for an alternative system of artistic practice. However they did not use traditional Buddhist themes or classic Zen forms, nor the traditional arts, such as calligraphy or *ikebana*, which had enjoyed revival in the 1950s. They 'rejected any derivative,

³⁷ Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*. 22.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. 396.

⁴⁰ Corkill, "Korean at the Forefront of Japan's Modern Art."

symbolic, or exotic use of Oriental motifs.’⁴¹ The *Mono-ha* artists characteristically used natural materials such as wood, stone, earth and water, with a minimum of human intervention.

An important thinker for many *Mono-ha* artists, including Lee, was Nishida Kitaro (1870 – 1945), identified with the Kyoto school of philosophy, who engaged in a synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophies. His central concept of ‘place of nothingness’ (*mu no basho*) is described by Michele Marra as ‘a kind of metaphysical ground that is alleged to explain the specificity of eastern culture.’⁴² Marra writes: ‘In order for an individual to determine itself ... there must be a determination of what he called ‘a place’ (*basho*).’⁴³ According to Nishida, the stress is on space, rather than time as in the West. The Buddhist concept of the unity of body and mind (*shijin ichinyo*) was set by Nishida against the Cartesian dualism of ‘subject’ and ‘object.’ *Mu no basho*, ‘field of nothingness,’ led to unity of body and mind.

Marra states that Nishida took the Kantian concept of the ‘self as the absolute background of all experience’ and interpreted it as ‘creative nothingness’. This uses the language of the *experience* of Eastern nothingness, expressed by the ‘artistic culture of the East.’ Nishida saw the action of the artist as, ‘to bring things to being as they are without distortion.’⁴⁴ This approach was developed by Lee Ufan and the *Mono-ha* artists.

In their critique of modernity, *Mono-ha* artists rejected the concept of ‘artistic creation’ or ‘making’ (*tsukuru*). A belief in the importance of a creative purpose by an artist was common to both Modernism and previous figurative painting. The *Mono-ha* introduced ambiguity and ‘ontological

⁴¹ Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*. 259.

⁴² Michele Marra, *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). 171.

⁴³ Ibid. 173.

⁴⁴ Michele Marra, *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001). 276.

uncertainty.’⁴⁵ Lee rejected the ‘making’ of an object and as a leading theorist of *Mono-ha* argued for presenting ‘the world as it is,’ a phrase borrowed from artist Sekine Nobuo.⁴⁶ Joan Kee discusses this concept of ‘non making:’ ‘For Lee the only viable alternative was to allow the artwork to act on its own. The artist had to remove him or herself from the primary field of operation.’⁴⁷ Kee sees this demonstrated in both Lee’s sculpture and his painting.

According to Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, the term ‘School of Things’ points to Lee’s interest in expressing Kant’s ‘the thing in itself’ in his concurrent three-dimensional work.⁴⁸ At the beginning of *Mono-ha* in the 1960s, his approach was influenced by Sekine, but later he diverged from the *Mono-ha* over their elevation of the artist’s subjectivity, preferring to give more respect to the materials themselves.⁴⁹

The *Mono-ha* movement first attracted attention at the Kobe Biennial of 1968 with a massive, site-specific earthwork, *Isō-daichi, Phase–Mother Earth*, by Sekine. This was followed by articles by Lee Ufan, in art magazines of 1969 and 1970, providing a theoretical framework. Materials in their natural state were to be arranged on temporary ‘sites’ (*ba*), in the tension of indeterminate ‘situations’ (*jōkyō*), producing an ‘encounter with being’ (*sonzai to no deai*) and revealing ‘the world as it is.’⁵⁰ Another example is *Unnamed Situation I* (1970), by Suga Kishio, whose stated aim was to present objects in a state of ‘being left alone’ (*hōchi*).

⁴⁵ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 409.

⁴⁶ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 20.

⁴⁷ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 414.

⁴⁸ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 31ff.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 27-8.

⁵⁰ Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*. 262.



Figure 2 Sekine Nobuo, *Isō-daichi, Phase–Mother Earth*, 1968, earth, 260 x 220 x 200 cm, 2 parts. Installation view: Suma Palace Park, Kobe.



Figure 3 Suga Kishio, *Unnamed Situation I*, 1970, wood, window, air, landscape and light, maximum 25 x 25 x 200 cm, minimum 25 x 25 x 35 cm. Installation at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.

Monroe emphasises the importance of *Mono-ha* in positioning ‘Asia as central rather than peripheral to contemporary artistic practice.’ She writes:

the group moved to reclaim “Asian-ness”. The Japanese Mono-ha artists, all born in the 1940s and raised under the powerful influence of American thought and culture, resisted what they considered to be Japan’s blind appropriation of the modern system, and advocated a contemporary Asian art that gave form and meaning to their own particular world view.⁵¹

⁵¹ Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*. 257.

Munroe comments that the artists involved disliked the term *Mono-ha*, School of Things, because it inadequately described their intentions, which were not merely to present literal materials, as Minimalism did, but to raise questions about the way they exist in a place and how they relate to the viewer and to the world beyond. She describes one of Lee's *Relatum* works (in this case in a gallery) as involving 'the total experience of the spatial and temporal relationships among its various elements including the interior site, its lighting, and the movement of the viewer's body through the installation.'⁵² This theoretical position departed from Western exploration of subject and object and had more in common with the 'expanded field' concept of Rosalind Krauss (b. 1941). However, the *Mono-ha* theorists, such as Lee, effected their departure from Modernism independently from the American theorists, working from earlier twentieth century philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and rejecting illusionism and traditional categories of painting and sculpture. Hence, although there is a resemblance to Western art movements, such as Earthworks or Minimalism or post-Minimalism, the *Mono-ha* work did not evolve as a branch of international movements. On the contrary, in Munroe's view, the *Mono-ha* artists drew upon their scrutiny of traditional Japanese architecture in the aesthetics of everyday living space and in the construction of sacred sites.⁵³ She summarizes:

Mono-ha, which originated as a vision of alternative modernism centered on East Asian aesthetics, Buddhist metaphysics, and Taoist philosophy, succeeded in redefining the form and expression of contemporary Japanese art without resorting to exoticism.⁵⁴

However, to put Lee's work in a global context, when writing for the Guggenheim retrospective in 2011, Munroe describes Lee's practice as Post-Minimalist, rather than Modernist. She compares his work and the *Mono-ha* to the Western Post-Minimalist and conceptual movements: Arte

⁵² Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*. 265.

⁵³ Ibid. 266.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 268.

Povera, Process Art, and Earthworks. These Post-Modern vanguard movements developed simultaneously in different countries.⁵⁵

The artist himself, throughout his writings from 1967 to the present day, rejected Modernist painting and modes of 'making.'⁵⁶ The key to understanding his position lies in his three dimensional work (from 1967), which is about process and relationships, rather than materials or formal qualities. Lee frequently states that his sculpture is not about 'making' objects. The inception of the sculpture series preceded the painting series by nearly a decade. Seen in the light of his sculpture and his writings about sculpture, the paintings (such as the *From Point and From Line* series, later 1970s) should not be interpreted as 'making' but rather as process, expressing time.

In the debate over whether Lee's move from sculpture to painting (in the mid 1970s) was a move from 'not-making' to 'making,' in other words back to Modernism, Minemura Toshiaki, the *Mono-ha* critic, argued that Lee's painting should be seen 'as temporal records of continual repetition, rather than as conventional spatial compositions.'⁵⁷ The viewer experiences time passing, somewhat like experiencing a video-based work.⁵⁸

In his writings, Lee identified in Modernism the Western philosophy of a dichotomy of subject and object. For his own practice he advocated a more complex position:

⁵⁵ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 20.

⁵⁶ This is repeated throughout Lee Ufan, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*, trans. Stanley N. Anderson, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Lisson Gallery, 2004). This book was assembled from writings by Lee Ufan, published in catalogues, magazines and newspapers between 1967 and 2003.

⁵⁷ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 28.

⁵⁸ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 410.

I believe that a work of art should not be unified but come into being through a relationship that is set up, with some assistance from my ideas, between materials, space and viewers.⁵⁹

Lee understands his work as fully realized only when completed by a relationship with the viewer.

Kee argues that, in Lee's paintings, the Modernist principle of the autonomy of the artwork is challenged by 'relocating the central focus of the painting from the mark to the viewer.'⁶⁰ The medium of painting is biased towards the artist's right to create their own world separate from the viewer, as in Modernism or the representational art of the past. She argues that Lee met this challenge by not only recording a 'process' but also by manifesting 'the passage of time.' She comments that he objected to two particular assumptions: that painting is the art of representation, or that it is interesting because of an awareness of the artist's hand. She notes that Lee himself has never completely escaped from the viewer's awareness of the artist's hand, as that remains an essential part of the delight in his paintings. However, the balance had shifted and the active participation of the viewer had become of equal importance.⁶¹

Lee also rejected Modernism for what he saw as its over-concentration on the self, fuelled by the ego of the artist.⁶² To him it is a problem when art is nothing but the 'self-expressions' of the artist. It is central to his writings and practice that art should emerge from, as he writes,

⁵⁹ Lee Ufan, 'Japanese and Translation,' written from 1988 – 1992, in Lee, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*. 136.

⁶⁰ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 409.

⁶¹ Ibid. 409-410.

⁶² Lee, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*. Lee's dislike of the intrusion of the artist's ego is recurrent theme in these writings.

...an encounter between the outside world, human beings, the environment, and the interior world of the artist. It must be a *relatum* that mediates between these things and calls up diverse images.⁶³

His approach is to avoid focus on himself, the artist, in order to direct the viewer's attention to the larger context, developing a fuller perception.⁶⁴

Lee likes to use the metaphor of cuisine when explaining art and sculpture. He has compared contemporary sculpture to a Korean meal, where many dishes are on the table and people are free to pick up what they want in any order, arrange the various foods on their plate and mix them as they wish. A Western chef, on the other hand, dictates the order and arrangement of the dishes, as does, in his view, a Western modernist artist. Tatehata Akira comments that Lee loves to wander among *mono* (things) and chose what to pick up to gaze at as he walks.⁶⁵

In Lee's work both the artist and the viewer are involved in a 'direct phenomenological experience of matter and existence.' Monroe credits Lee with solving 'the problem of how to overcome Cartesian ideology and disclose existence as vivid phenomenological fact.'⁶⁶ His focus was on setting up an 'encounter,' as 'a moment of directness' between the viewer and the materials in the space. In his three dimensional work the viewer was invited to walk among rocks and steel plates in an 'inherently temporary set of relationships.'

Munroe also points out how, in a subtle way, Lee's practice is very much about 'the body' (a key concern of contemporary art) in both the making and the viewing of art.⁶⁷ She describes his painting as an 'essentially

⁶³ Lee Ufan, 'Meeting and Parting,' written from 1988 – 1996, in Lee, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*. 172.

⁶⁴ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 38.

⁶⁵ Akira Tatehata, "The Poetics of Gaze," trans. Reiko Tomii, *Marking Infinity*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim, 2011). 36.

⁶⁶ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 25.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 22.

performance method of making marks in space.’⁶⁸ So, by an approach of process in time, rather than object making, and of giving the viewer an essential role of free choice in an open-ended situation, Lee moved into the Post-Modern era and stands as a contemporary artist.

SCULPTURE

Lee Ufan ‘forsook painting around 1967,’⁶⁹ in order to concentrate on three-dimensional work, with direct reference to Maurice Merleau-Pont’s *The Phenomenology of Perception*. This work developed as the *Relatum* series. From 1972 he gave the title *Relatum* to all his three-dimensional works and also retrospectively renamed his previous sculptures, such as *Phenomenology and Perception*.⁷⁰ *Relatum* is a philosophical term for objects or events between which a relationship exists, and so was appropriate for Lee’s arrangements.⁷¹

As he developed the *Relatum series* Lee diverged from Nishida’s theory of place. Lee’s work gives equal importance to the site, the placed objects and the viewer. He disagrees with Nishida on the priority of place and prefers to view ‘place’ as a precondition for ‘encounter.’ His focus is on the relationship between things, without detracting from their individual

⁶⁸ Literati painting in China and Korea sometimes operated as a communal performance activity.

⁶⁹ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 409.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 31. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word ‘relatum’ as ‘chiefly *Philos.* and *Logic*. Each of two or more terms, objects, or events between which a relation exists.’ The earliest example dates from 1647, but there are also references back to Aristotle, who widened the meaning from perfect cases. In a pair of *relata*, without the one the other ‘vanishes.’

This terminology has similarities to the titles used by New Zealand artist Pauline Rhodes (*Intensum* and *Extensum*), who also drew on the ideas of European philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty.

distinctive qualities.⁷² Nishida saw an artwork as having a relationship between its constituent parts, which excluded the outside, whereas Lee wanted an expanded concept of place where ‘openness is an essential criterion.’⁷³ In the *Relatum* works there is a questioning of boundaries between the work of art and its surroundings. Von Berswordt-Wallrabe discusses Lee’s work in the light of Ernst Michalshi’s term ‘aesthetic boundary,’ meaning ‘shaped art-space’ meets ‘unshaped open space.’ The viewer relates to the materials, to the site and to the larger, unbounded environment. Looking at the *Relatum* works she says, ‘the relations between its components are deliberately vague and apparently provisional.’⁷⁴

Kee stresses the importance of the relationships very deliberately set up by Lee, for example in the forest setting in figure 4.

The apparent randomness of their placement and the substantial gaps between each rock all but compelled the viewer to step around and in between them. Low in height, each rock could be seen from all angles by the viewer. One rock may be seen alone, together with others, or all at once. Entirely absent from these works is any indication of a need to view the stones according to a hierarchy or sequence. The viewer is free to direct the course of his or her experience.⁷⁵

⁷² von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 59.

⁷³ Ibid. 60.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 62.

⁷⁵ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 409.



Figure 4 Lee Ufan, *Relatum-Holzwege II*, 2000, steel plate, 5 x 300 x 400 cm, two limestone rocks, each approx. 110 x 80 x 80 cm, Situation Kunst Foundation, Haus Weitmar Park, Bochum, Germany.

In her analysis of the *Relatum* series (1968 - 2003), von Berswordt-Wallrabe discusses comparisons with significant Western artists such as Joseph Beuys, Carl Andre, Richard Serra and Richard Long. She notes that, compared to Serra's landscape pieces, Lee's interventions are much more restrained and integrated with their surroundings. Also notable is that there is no recognizable order to the arrangement of the components, unlike the works of Serra or Long.⁷⁶

Von Berswordt-Wallrabe records Lee's interest in the account of the tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), who being moved by the sight of fallen leaves, swept his garden and waited for the greater pleasure of viewing a few more leaves randomly fallen on the ground. Lee's aim is to 'make the world more vividly visible' by a few limited and 'tentative' interventions. He responds to the specific qualities of existing things, rather than shaping

⁷⁶ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 63-65. Galerie m Bochum, founded by Alexander von Berswordt-Wallrabe in 1969, represents both Lee Ufan and Richard Serra.

something new. From his intervention can come an intensified awareness of both the site and also the passage of time.⁷⁷

In comparison with Land Art, such as *Double Negative* by Michael Heizer, Lee's work is placed in easily accessible, unremarkable sites, as well as being relatively small and easily installed. Contrasting him to the Land artists, Von Berswordt-Wallrabe comments:

Taking command in this way is completely foreign to Lee. The *Tokyo Relatum*, for example, shows him engaging in a dialogue with an existing situation rather than subjugating it to his will. If *Double Negative* overwhelms viewers and induces in them a feeling of sublimity, *Relatum* encourages them to look probingly.⁷⁸

She says that Lee 'offers his viewers the possibility of engaging in a dialogue that takes the form of slow, attentive observation.'⁷⁹

A very significant characteristic of Lee's sculptural installations is the juxtaposition of industrial and natural materials; most frequently stone and steel plate. The installations shown in figures 5 and 6 are typical of his work from 1967 onwards. In both interior and exterior settings a very limited number of materials are set together for the consideration of the viewer. Jae-Ryung Roe emphasises that his choices of materials are very deliberate, as his writings make explicit. The study of rocks is basic and essential to traditional East Asian art. Stone stands for the natural, while steel plate stands for the sphere of human artifacts, in particular factory production in the twentieth century. From a formal point of view the mass of the rock contrasts with the plane of the steel, and there is also contrast between rough and smooth texture. Roe summarizes Lee's importance in the development of Korean sculpture:

⁷⁷ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 49, quoting the artist's references to Sen no Rikyū in *The Art of Encounter*, 211 and 238. This version of the story is slightly different from the retelling in Okakura Kakuzō, *The Book of Tea* (1906).

⁷⁸ Ibid. 63.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 34.

And thus, although the materials he used – stone, steel and mirror plates – are not materials foreign to contemporary sculpture, it was novel to what had constituted Korean sculpture previously. Lee Ufan's sculpture realized the essence of sculptural material, formal organisation and spatial location.⁸⁰

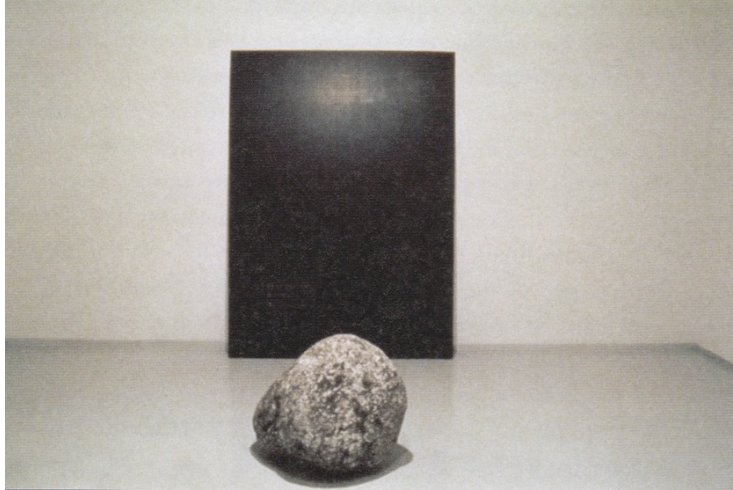


Figure 5 Lee Ufan, *Relatum*, 1979, steel plate 280 x 220 x 1 cm, granite stone, height approx. 60cm. The Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura/Hayama/Japan.



Figure 6 Lee Ufan, *Relatum*, 1968/9, steel, glass, stone, 170 x 140 x 40 cm. Formerly *Phenomena and Perception B*.

⁸⁰ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 65.

PAINTING

In 1973 Lee Ufan was appointed professor at Tama University, in Tokyo. He started working on two series of paintings, entitled *From Point* and *From Line*. Then, from 1982 to 1991, Lee produced paintings in a series entitled *East Winds* and *With Winds*. In 1992 he started a series of paintings entitled *Correspondance* (sic). In 1997 Lee was appointed professor at the Ecole National des Beaux-Arts, Paris and based himself in Japan and France. In 2001 he was awarded the Japanese Praemium Imperiale for painting.⁸¹ This gave him recognition in Japan, rather than being, in his own words, ‘a meddlesome troublemaker from abroad.’⁸²

In order to understand Lee’s work as a painter some background knowledge of Korean painting is necessary. Traditionally in East Asian painting the support was paper or silk and the pigments were bound with glue and applied with a broad, soft, flat brush. As part of the promotion of Western technological progress in Japan during the Meiji era (1868 - 1912), oil on canvas was advocated as the modern way of painting. *Yōga* was the term usually used to define picture-making in the Western style, in contrast to *nihonga*, the traditional Japanese style. *Yōga* and *nihonga* were still being taught separately in Japanese art schools in the 1980s.⁸³ The equivalent Korean terms were *seoyang-hwa* for Western painting (oil on canvas), *han’guk-hwa* for traditional Korean painting, and *tong’yang-hwa* for all types of traditional East Asian ink painting, including Japanese painting.⁸⁴

The first information about Western art that reached Korea was gleaned from illustrations in church publications brought by missionaries from China in the seventeenth century.⁸⁵ More knowledge of techniques of

⁸¹ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 203, Chronology.

⁸² Corkill, "Korean at the Forefront of Japan's Modern Art," section 1, 2 of 4.

⁸³ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 77-8.

⁸⁴ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 10-12.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 10.

Western painting, such as two-point perspective, chiaroscuro and scientific observation of nature, was brought from China by envoys of the Korean Court during the eighteenth century. Koreans found these techniques interesting but considered the paintings aesthetically inferior to traditional Korean art, which 'aimed to reflect the subject's inner spirit.'⁸⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century a new style of painting was forming from the assimilation of Western pictorialism into the conventions of traditional Korean ink painting. In the twentieth century, with the colonization of Korea by Japan from 1910, Japanese artists came to Korea to teach *seoyang-hwa* as a separate school of painting. During the colonial period many Japanese artists came to Korea to live and work and young Koreans went to study Western style art in Japan.⁸⁷ Lee Ufan followed in their footsteps, making the move from post-war Korea to Japan at a time when minimalism was dominant in *seoyang-hwa* studies.⁸⁸

Traditional Korean painting was also categorized by medium into two groups. *Ch'aemuk-hwa* used brilliant mineral colours and was seen in religious art, court painting and folk art. By contrast traditional Korean ink monochrome had been used for landscape painting and was also the medium for 'Four Gentlemen' painting (peonies, chrysanthemum, prunus and orchids) and genre painting.⁸⁹ In 1923 the *Tongyon-sa* association was formed with the aim of expressing 'a distinct Korean form of ink painting.'⁹⁰ The 1980s saw the revival of traditional ink monochrome painting, known as *sumuk-hwa*. Lee made his selection of mineral pigments, in muted hues, deliberately, in the context of these traditions.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Jane Portal, *Korea: Art and Archaeology* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

⁸⁷ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 10-12.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 37.

⁸⁹ Kumja Paik Kim, *The Art of Korea: Highlights from the Collection of the San Francisco's Asian Art Museum* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2006). 25 and Roe 9 -11.

⁹⁰ Portal, *Korea: Art and Archaeology*. 170.

⁹¹ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 77.

Lee had trained in his youth in Korean calligraphy and painting, with an emphasis on practising point and line.⁹² At art school in Seoul in 1956 he studied ink painting.⁹³ After his graduation in philosophy in Tokyo in 1961 he started painting professionally. His early experiments at that stage in his career were mainly with traditional East Asian techniques and materials. Von Berswordt-Wallrabe suggests that he may have then deliberately moved to set up a relationship between Eastern and Western painting by choosing to paint on canvas rather than paper or silk, combining the Western support, canvas, with traditional East Asian paints and brushes. This decision, however, can also be seen as an outworking of his intense interest in the properties of materials themselves, which was also demonstrated in his 3-dimensional work.⁹⁴ Kee argues vigorously that choice of materials should not be taken as a definition of Asian art, as artists' choices are much more complex and individual than such a simplistic view.⁹⁵

Lee restricted his choice of colour to burnt orange (for example, figure 7, *From Point*, 1973) or cobalt blue (for example, figure 8, *From Line*, 1973) on a white ground.⁹⁶ The characteristics of the mineral pigments were displayed by the use of transparent animal skin glue (*nikawa*) as binder and the neutral uniformity of the canvas. However, he often used coarse canvas, which emphasizes the choice of support material, as well as adding texture to the painting.⁹⁷ This can be seen in figure 7. In the *From Line* series the brush is loaded and drawn across the canvas until the paint is exhausted. As

⁹² Corkill, "Korean at the Forefront of Japan's Modern Art," vol.

⁹³ Joan Kee, "Longevity Studies: The Contemporary Korean Art Exhibition at Fifty," LACMA (Los Angeles: 2009).

⁹⁴ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 78 – 79.

⁹⁵ Joan Kee, "Contemporaneity as Calculus," *Third Text* 25.5 (2011). In this article Kee discussed 'the medium as the measure'. This issue was also discussed in the workshop 'Impossible Purities: Modern East Asian Art and the Question of Artistic Medium,' 28 April 2012, Department of Art History, University of Chicago.

⁹⁶ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 28.

⁹⁷ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 79.

abstract painting it bears some similarity to Western Modernism, but conceptually it is rooted in East Asian tradition, both in terms of materials and the artist's approach, and was then developed within Lee's thinking about time and process in contemporary art.

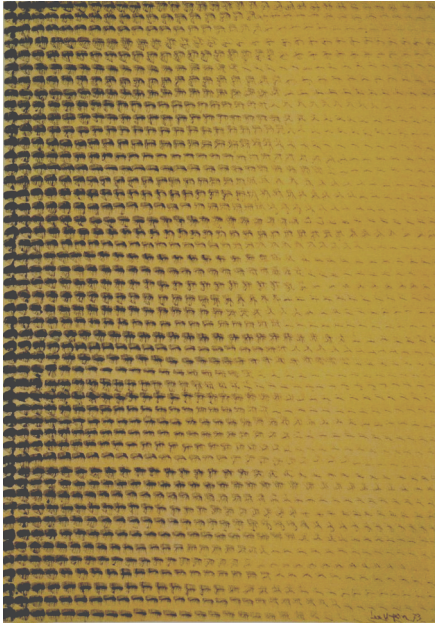


Figure 7 Lee Ufan, *From Point*, 1973, glue and mineral pigment on canvas, 163 x 114 cm.

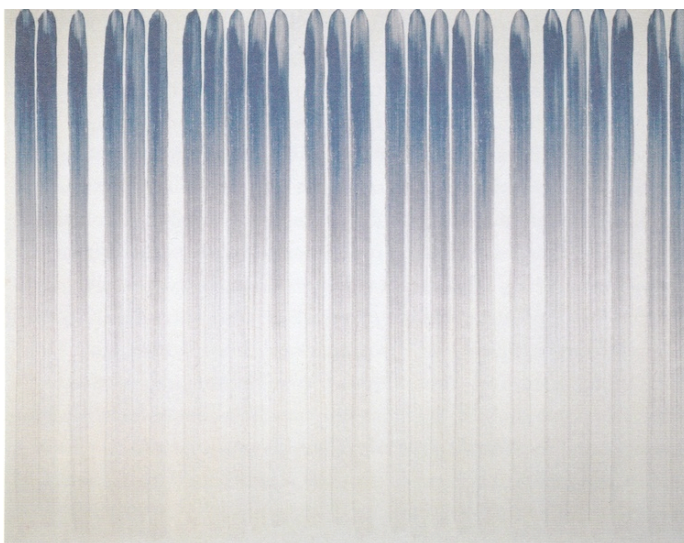


Figure 8 Lee Ufan, *From Line*, 1973, glue and stone pigment on canvas, 182 x 227 cm.

Lee himself described his work as part of the East Asian tradition of calligraphy. He wrote, 'I think my work is closer to writing than to painting, in that there is no representation in it.'⁹⁸ This echoes the longstanding, traditional view of Chinese critics that painting and calligraphy are one.⁹⁹ The brushstroke is very important to Lee. He describes his method, his materials and his personal preparation: 'Before working, I calm my breathing, correct my posture, and hold my brush quietly.'¹⁰⁰

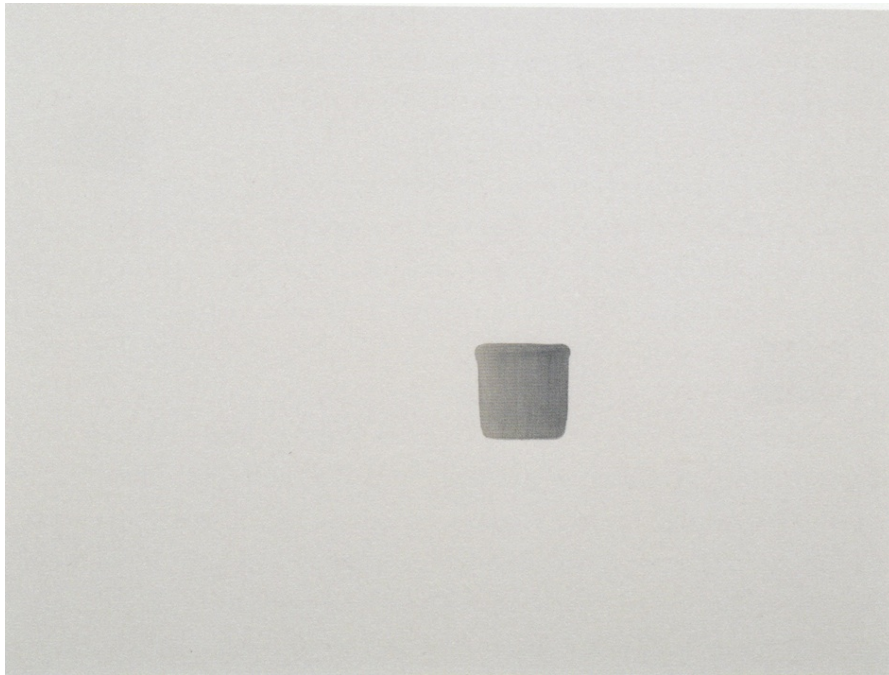


Figure 9 Lee Ufan, *Correspondance*, 1999, oil and stone pigment on canvas, 218 x 2991 cm.

Von Berswordt-Wallrabe describes Lee's brushstroke as a 'gesture' and draws attention to his use of the East Asian brush, but she sees his discipline and control, as well as his repetition and series, as analytical rather than expressive:

⁹⁸ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 98.

⁹⁹ Gao Jianping, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art: From Calligraphy to Painting*, Uppsala, 1996. 84.

¹⁰⁰ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 91.

The image results not from a schematic reproduction of the same form, but from the repetition of a single act or gesture. Not notably expressive, the gesture reveals how each line is made by eliminating as far as possible all traces of the artist's personal touch. The execution evinces remarkable concentration and self-discipline...For him, the only conceivable tool for applying the paint to the canvas was a soft, broad brush, which, even when guided with intense concentration by the most practiced and skilled hand, can never obey the will of the painter exclusively and with total precision.¹⁰¹

Von Berswordt-Wallrabe compares Lee's work in series to Western artists of the 1960s and 70s. Since 1945, many artists in the West had experimented with painting in series, with a height of interest in the 1960s and 70s. They examined 'the relationship between repetition and variation.'¹⁰² She sees their work as a 'reaction against the subjectivity of Art Informal' and Abstract Expressionism. Artists such as Gerhard Richter and Robert Ryman 'worked in abstract modes and, eschewing illusionism and expressivity, approached painting in a largely analytical manner.' She points out that these artists were not necessarily in contact with each other but shared a similar approach and Lee, likewise, developed his approach separately. Lee's practice was to devote himself to a series of works made over the timescale of a decade, experimenting with repetition and temporality. Painting is shown as 'a series of acts...a temporal process.'¹⁰³

Writing as a curator of Korean art being shown in Europe in 1992, Lewis Biggs summarises Lee's work (both sculpture and painting) as 'allowing objects or materials to be quietly themselves.' However, he too rejects the idea of Lee's painting as expressive: 'the brushstrokes are heavy with the intention of their maker – not a personal or expressive intention but a philosophical one: how to produce a sense of the infinite from the repetition

¹⁰¹ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 73, 76 and also 79, referring to Lee's essay: 'Using a Brush', Lee 2004.

¹⁰² Ibid. 88.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 76-7 and discussion, 'Repetition and Temporality,' 95 - 104

of a painted mark.’ He also suggests that the blue paint used in the series *With Winds* was chosen as the colour of infinity.¹⁰⁴

A different view of East Asian calligraphy and painting is expounded by Gao Jianping, in *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art*. He sees them as profoundly expressive. He refers to the words of Shi Tao (1642-1707), the great painter of the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), who wrote that painting should ‘follow the heart’ and ‘the feelings of the painter should be crystallized in every single stroke.’ The ‘making’ of a single stroke is not merely ‘a solid basis’ for a painting, but is also the vehicle for articulation of feelings.¹⁰⁵

Literati painters believed that a person’s character was expressed through calligraphy and that ‘the free expression of the painter’s inner feeling was achieved through the brushstroke.’ The ‘line is very important.’ Leading on from that is the fact that the ‘line’ has direction, which is very obvious in Lee’s paintings (for example, figures 7 and 8). Another traditional view was that the beauty of line lay in being freehand. Freehand is appreciated as ‘real painting,’ as opposed to ‘dead painting.’ A line should move ‘smoothly and freely, thus demonstrating confidence, determination, and carefreeness.’ Also, a line should clearly have a beginning, middle and end.¹⁰⁶

These ideas from traditional calligraphy appear in Lee’s paintings, for example in the *From Line* series, where the line is hand drawn, but with the upmost control and discipline. The brush used is a traditional East Asian brush and the ground is horizontal as the artist works. Like the traditional view, a thread running through Lee’s writings is his concern with the character and integrity of the artist.

Lee’s painting creates a bridge between traditional East Asian painting and twentieth century Western painting. Gao is describing the traditional when

¹⁰⁴ Lewis Biggs, "Working with Nature: Contemporary Art from Korea," ed. Tate Gallery Liverpool (1992).

¹⁰⁵ Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art: From Calligraphy to Painting*. 174 – 175.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 30 – 59.

he writes: 'the beauty of a painting can exist in the quality of a line and in the connection between lines, rather than in what the painting represents' and states that the painter's act is embodied in the painting, so that the action is suggested by the painting.¹⁰⁷ Lee explores such concepts in his series of paintings and discusses his views on the contrasts and similarities in attitudes between East and West in many of his writings, such as the essays in *The Art of Encounter*.¹⁰⁸ In interviews with Edan Corkill, in 2010, he tells his life-story as an example, and recounts his musings of many years comparing the philosophy and art of East and West.¹⁰⁹

Lee's painting paved the way for contemporary Korean art in his attitude to the viewer. Kee presents Lee's paintings as an attempt to make a 'constructive response' to the various world crises of the twentieth century, particularly those affecting Korea and a desire for a different, non-hierarchical world. In this formidable aim the participation of the viewer is key: 'the artwork turned the viewer from a member of its audience to a collaborator in its mission.'¹¹⁰

Kee describes how the viewer, when experiencing these paintings close up is overwhelmed by the scale of the work and sees only the marks 'whose linearity compels the viewer to retrace the artist's gesture in producing the mark.' The viewer comprehends the action of the brush loaded with pigment to its fade-out but is prevented from seeing the 'end' of the painting. From a distance the viewer encounters the whole area of the painting, the marks and the space, and the lack of illusionist depth. The use of mineral-based pigment, rather than the high viscosity of oil or acrylic, equalizes the importance of marked and unmarked space, as does the choice of a single colour. This application of pigment is non-referential and non-representational. Kee argues that the artist has deliberately surrendered his

¹⁰⁷ Gao, *The Expressive Act in Chinese Art: From Calligraphy to Painting*. 75 & 85.

¹⁰⁸ Lee, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*.

¹⁰⁹ Corkill, "Korean at the Forefront of Japan's Modern Art."

¹¹⁰ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 406.

rights of authorship to determine meaning. Lee is very aware of treading the line between accident and the artist's intention. 'The painting works only upon the initiative of the viewer,' and the artist 'facilitates perception' as a mediator of the 'encounter.'¹¹¹

Lee's paintings were part of a growing maturity and confidence in Korean art. The series *From Point* and *From Line* became known internationally and Lee was increasingly seen as one of Korea's most important contemporary artists, along with Nam June Paik. From around 1969 he had become better known in Korea and was enthusiastically received by some, leading to his selection as a representative of Korea in the 1971 Paris Biennale. At that time preference was given to Korean artists working abroad, who were seen as having the potential to be recognized internationally. Others continued to regard him with suspicion, because of his switch from Seoul to Tokyo as a student, and because he had chosen to settle in Japan, although there were obvious practical reasons for the artist to practise in Tokyo at that time. He was accused of 'foreign thinking' and 'Western ways.'¹¹² However, the length of his active career and international recognition has allowed this hostility to dissipate over time. In 2007, when the theme of the Venice Biennale was 'multiple modernities and contemporary global art,' Lee again represented Korea, though his mature practice transcended nationalism.¹¹³

Lee Yongwoo, foundation director of the Gwangju Biennale, argues that during the 1960s and early 1970s Korea was particularly receptive to Western information and art, from performance art and earth art to conceptual art, especially where it could give expression to the political situation. However, in his view, in the mid 1970s there was a 'subtle change' in Korea's modern art and the 'Koreanised version of Modernism came under scrutiny, eventually to regenerate into a unique form of painting

¹¹¹ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 414 - 423.

¹¹² Ibid. 413.

¹¹³ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 30.

removed from the influence of the West or Japan.’¹¹⁴ Korean Monochrome painting, *dansaekhwa*, developed and was seen as distinctly Korean, and the equal of Japanese and Western painting. It also had a role as a silent, non-compliant gesture during the 1970s, under dictatorship.¹¹⁵ These were still difficult times for artists. In 1974 Lee returned to Seoul for an exhibition and was arrested and violently interrogated for six days, despite testimony to his standing as an international artist, after which he did not return to Korea for some years. Instead he participated in exhibitions outside Korea, for example in 1975 he assisted with the show, *Five Korean artists, Five Kinds of White* at the Tokyo Gallery.¹¹⁶ Once *In Search of Encounter* had been translated from Japanese into Korean, Korean artists had more opportunity to appreciate and admire Lee’s theoretical writing. His residencies in Tokyo and Paris became seen as positive and offering an alternative to the previous colonialist art hierarchy in Korea. As a consequence, he was able to play a part in growing discussion in Korea about ‘internationalism and cultural nationalism.’¹¹⁷

Lee has occupied an ambivalent position in the East Asian art worlds. At the start of his career in Japan he was an outsider, sometimes allowed to participate and sometimes excluded. Lee thought that the Japanese found his critical writings too ‘candid’ and that his use of the term ‘natural,’ which was central to Korean aesthetic thought, was misunderstood in Japan because it was invested with meaning different to that expressed in Japanese culture.¹¹⁸

Roe sees Lee as a defining influence in Korean art of the 1960s (when Minimalism was dominant), although he was living in Japan. She describes his work since the 1970s as ‘the gradual relinquishing of the image,’ along

¹¹⁴ Lee Yongwoo, *Information and Reality* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 1995). 19ff.

¹¹⁵ Munroe, *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity*. 29

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 184.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 29.

¹¹⁸ Kee, "Points, Lines, Encounters: The World According to Lee Ufan." 423.

with a renunciation of Western art.¹¹⁹ In his writings in the 1990s Lee was reflecting on the history of abstract Modernism in the West, with mixed feelings about loss of meaning, and the development of contemporary art.¹²⁰ In an interview with Corkill in 2010, Lee talks disparagingly about Western artists use of the 'visual tricks of illusion' and art which is 'too self-referential,' both of which he has doubts about.¹²¹ Corkill comments that Western viewers tend to interpret the simplicity of Lee's paintings as an expression of a particularly Asian aesthetic. The artist, however, insists that they owe more to his reflections on the Western Modernist tradition than anything else.¹²²

Lee has been both a leading actor and a commentator on Korean art of the Modernist and contemporary eras.¹²³ He sees himself in this role. In his interview with Corkill he says:

Of course, I can't deny my own background, so if people want to talk about influences of Eastern thought, then yes, I have those. But these days it is better. People don't say that I am oriental or Asian so much. They just say I am Lee. What I want to do is think more about the problems in Modernism. Only recently have people started to look at that and say, "He is making an interesting suggestion about Modernism." That's very pleasing.

He identifies his art as being primarily about 'making and not making,' and for that reason having worldwide relevance.¹²⁴

Lee's writings and practice foreshadowed trends in Korean art. Chiu & Genocchio claim for him not only intellectual leadership of the *Mono-ha* group but also influence on 'emerging installation and performance art in

¹¹⁹ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 37-39.

¹²⁰ Lee, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*. For example the essay, "The issue of Abstraction in Painting," 1990 – 1996. 86 – 91.

¹²¹ Corkill, "Korean at the Forefront of Japan's Modern Art," section 3.

¹²² Ibid. section 1.

¹²³ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 39-41.

¹²⁴ Corkill, "Korean at the Forefront of Japan's Modern Art," section 3.

Korea in the late 1960s and 1970s.¹²⁵ Art historian Jane Portal sees developments in Korean art in the 1990s as ‘a gradual blurring of the divisions between different media in the arts’ and a bridging of ‘the division between Korean painting and Western painting,’ as well as the rise of installation art. Von Berswordt-Wallrabe sees Lee’s background of ‘crossing borders’ as key to understanding the artist. Hence she describes his work as operating around the borderline of painting and sculpture, while accepting the traditional distinction between the two media. She sees his painting and sculpture complimenting each other, as do his practice and his theoretical writings.¹²⁶



Figure 10 Porcelain plate made by Park Young-sook and painted in underglaze cobalt blue by Lee Ufan, diameter 30 cm.

Lee Ufan’s long and productive working life has spanned an era from the emergence of Korea from the devastating wars of the mid twentieth century to the present day. Through his writings, painting, sculpture and teaching he

¹²⁵ Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio, *Contemporary Asian Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010). 14.

¹²⁶ von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Lee Ufan: Encounters with the Other*. 7-8.

has developed an art practice which is deeply rooted in the philosophy of both East and West, but has served in a redefinition of East Asian art for the following generations. He has been a leader and innovator in the development of international art, while still remaining identified as a Korean.

CHAPTER TWO: LEE BUL

What does the space of our living look like? A place where the gravity of tradition and blind worship of economic development collide; where hyper-technology and superstitions coexist; where buildings go up at a breakneck pace and tumble down with an unsettling frequency; where a deep-rooted patriarchal order is always packaged in an image of the youthful, delicate woman; where beyond coruscating neon signs and brilliant machine aesthetics, the smell of corruption and decay arises; where excess and lack, beauty and panic, past and future, the original and the kitsch all coexist, to make up a space that is alternately postmodern and medieval. These contradictory phenomena and value systems intersect with and crash into one another, producing an excess energy that threatens to erupt through the fissures at the margins of our apparently efficient, stable life.

Ahn Soyeon, 2002¹²⁷

The intersection between utopian vision and brutal state repression.¹²⁸

A cultural agitator from the start, Lee recently turned from mythological to historical metaphor.¹²⁹

Lee Bul has had an exceptionally productive career, in progress for over 20 years. Characteristically she has developed themes over a period of time and then moved on to others, which may appear to be different but prove to have connections. Lee first became known in the 1980s for performance art, involving feminist questions, moving on in the mid 1990s to installations, sometimes with Korean cultural references. Her work often importuned the audience and assailed the senses. From the late 1990s the spotlight turned to the era of information and technology, with cyborgs and karaoke pods. Her

¹²⁷ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 17.

¹²⁸ Almanac, "Five for 2007: Lee Bul," *Art Asia Pacific* (2008). 107.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

work is characterized by meticulous craftsmanship. Fish and monsters recur through various periods. 2005 was a watershed year, marked by Lee's two *mon grand récit* works, which opened a broader discussion of twentieth century history, culture and society. Alongside her three-dimensional work were a profusion of drawings. There are also some delicate paintings on silk, which, while relating to the sculpture, appear almost traditional. Throughout all periods of Lee Bul's work there is a strong pulse of analysis, questioning and challenging assumptions.

With a family history common to many Korean artists, Lee's parents were political dissidents, leading 'fugitive lives'¹³⁰ or under constant surveillance because of their known left wing views,¹³¹ surviving the hardships of colonialism, the wars and the political clampdown. Lee Bul was born in 1964 and grew up in the post-Korean War economic era, among rapidly increasing affluence, consumerism and burgeoning popular culture.

As conditions in Korea improved Lee was able to go to Hongik University, in Seoul. At that time, in the 1980s, the mainstream art in Korea was High Modernism, including the Monochrome school of painting and Minimalist sculpture. The alternative was 'People's Art', *minjoong misool*.¹³² This choice was current at the art school when Lee was enrolled, but she rejected these options. She regarded as 'dead languages' the abstract minimal or figurative-realism current at the time in Korean sculpture.¹³³ She preferred to associate with Theatre Studies.¹³⁴ However, she graduated in 1987 with a BFA in sculpture.

¹³⁰ James B. Lee, "Yi Bul: The Aesthetics of Cultural Complicity and Subversion," *Art Asia Pacific* 2.2 (1995). 55.

¹³¹ Robert J. Fouser, "Lee Bul: The Question of Body Ownership," *Art Asia Pacific*. 28 (2000). 57.

¹³² H. G. Masters, "Lee Bul: Wayward Tangents," *Art Asia Pacific*. 56 (2007). 128.

¹³³ Kim Seung-duk, "Les Deux Corps De L'artiste: An Interview with Lee Bul," trans. Stanley N et al. Anderson, *Lee Bul: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, ed. Yasuko Furuichi (Tokyo; Kurashiki: The Japan Foundation Asia Center and Kokusai Koryu Kikin Ajia Senta, 2003). 41.

¹³⁴ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 18.

Lee and her contemporaries energetically embraced decadence, kitsch and nihilism, ‘challenging the establishment and trying out a liberating disorder’¹³⁵ in their sculpture, installations and performance art. They monitored popular culture in East and West. They explored new media and took their art onto the streets. Their materials were cheap, brightly coloured and unmistakably ‘fake’. Their art read as social comment on the economic boom in Korea in the 1980s and the less desirable effects of capitalism, such as the collapse of hastily erected buildings.



Figure 11 Choi Jeong-Hwa, *Super Flower*, 1995, waterproof textiles, air compressor, 5 x 3.5 x 1.5 m.

Figure 12 Choi Jeong-Hwa, *Plastic Paradise*, 1997, plastic, 260 x 200 x 200 cm.

Lee was a founding member and a leader of a group known as ‘Museum’ (‘fear’ in English), formed in 1987.¹³⁶ They were non-political and,

¹³⁵ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 102.

¹³⁶ Grazia Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul," trans. James B. Lee Korean/English, *Lee Bul: On Every New Shadow* (Paris: Foundation Cartier pour l'art contemporain/Thames & Hudson, 2007). 121.

according to Robert J. Fouser, mainly interested in self-expression, despite 1987 being the year of mass pro-democracy demonstrations in Korea.¹³⁷ Their slogan was 'the studio as laboratory.' This movement of artists, who emerged from the art schools in the late 1980s, sustained their activity in the Korean art scene for about a decade.

MONSTROUS WOMAN, SEQUINED FISH

For the first decade of her career, after graduating in 1987, Lee Bul's practice was characterized by the use of 'the body,' in a variety of ways. She started by using her own body in performance art, then she referred to the female body in her *Majestic Splendour* series, and then she returned to using her own image in her balloon series. This use of the body, combined with her particular choices of materials and themes, led to her work being categorized at the time as feminist,¹³⁸ described by James B. Lee as 'a strategy of resistance and subversion.'¹³⁹ However, other performance works by Lee from the same era are on topics other than feminism, such as comments on the art world and the commodification of art,¹⁴⁰ but are not often referred to, possibly because they do not fit the narrative. In the light of her more recent work and by the artist's own interpretation,¹⁴¹ I would argue that she was always concerned with wider universal themes, with

¹³⁷ Fouser, "Lee Bul: The Question of Body Ownership." 57.

¹³⁸ For example, Lim Young Bang, "The Evolution and Development of Contemporary Korean Art," *Tradition and Change*, ed. Caroline Turner (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993). 145. Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, Third ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002). 453-5, presents Lee as an example of the growing interest in Asian contemporary art in the 1990s, demonstrated by Lee's installation of *Majestic Splendour* at the inaugural 1993 Asia-Pacific Triennial.

¹³⁹ Lee, "Yi Bul: The Aesthetics of Cultural Complicity and Subversion." 52.

¹⁴⁰ *Auction and Dish Washing* in Lee, *Information and Reality*. 77 and *The Visible Pumping Heart* in Lee, "Yi Bul: The Aesthetics of Cultural Complicity and Subversion." 58.

¹⁴¹ For example, Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul." 15.

feminism and the use of the body being just an obvious avenue for critique of society at that time.¹⁴²

A major theme in Lee's early work was the image of Asian woman as a hybrid of butterfly and monster. On the one hand there is the delicate woman in traditional costume, or the Korean fan dance doll, or the attractive modern hostess at trade fairs. In contrast there is the scary sexual predator or the ancient shamaness. One of her first strategies was to fabricate bizarre costumes for herself, combining elements of traditional female costume with distorted, disturbing and excessive additions. She also applied to her sculptural objects ornaments and accessories normally found as accoutrements of the attractive female, but used in surprising ways, such as decorating fish with sequined hairpins. These works all assaulted the viewer in one way or another; visually, by smell, or by accosting passersby in the street. These challenging images made manifest both the outsider Western view of the exotic Madam Butterfly and the insider view of a patriarchal East Asian society.

Lee started her career vigorously with performance art. In *Abortion* (1989), at the Dong Soong Art Center, Seoul, the artist hung upside down and naked, recounting experiences of abortion, interwoven with poetry and the lyrics of pop-songs.¹⁴³ Predictably, this offended public opinion and the conservative Korean art community.¹⁴⁴ Her performance work was then developed in the construction of 'soft sculpture' body suits, made of fabric and sponge and trailing ambiguous appendages, like artificial limbs.¹⁴⁵ Photographs documented the costumes and performances.

¹⁴² Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 17. Ahn comments on the range of Lee's ideas: not only feminism, the politics of the body and countering authoritarian, masculinist visual culture, but also contesting Western Orientalism and orthodox art-historical judgement, and exploring issues of postmodernity.

¹⁴³ Roman Kurzmeyer, "Cyborgs," trans. John Southard, *Lee Bul: In Media Res*, ed. James B. Lee (Seoul: Ssamzie Art Project, 1999). 25.

¹⁴⁴ Fouser, "Lee Bul: The Question of Body Ownership." 57.

¹⁴⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Cyborgs & Silicon: Korean Artist Lee Bul About Her Work," *artorbit*. 1 (1998).

Sorry for suffering - you think I'm a puppy on a picnic? 1990, was an extended performance, lasting twelve days, starting in Seoul at Kimpo Airport and travelling to Tokyo, where the artist walked the streets startling the Japanese pedestrians. These street encounters were documented in photographs, including close-ups of the sculptural body suits showing the artist reclining amidst a writhing mass of unspecified limbs. The choice of colours - a bright flamingo pink combined with paler flesh pink - intensified the image of the monstrous woman. The gaudy colours continued the 'Museum' style and the performance continued her explorations of use of 'the body.'



Figure 13 Lee Bul, *Sorry for suffering - you think I'm a puppy on a picnic?* 1990, twelve-day performance, Tokyo.

As her practice developed Lee was invited to take part in the inaugural 1993 Asia-Pacific Triennial. She was seen predominantly as a performance artist, however Sung Wan Kyung, writing for the exhibition catalogue, comments on the breadth of her practice and her 'aggression, strength, sense of kitsch, energetic positiveness [and] mastery of diverse materials (generally drawn from non-artistic everyday life).'

¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Sung Wan Kyung, "Bul Lee," *The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, ed. Suzanne Grano (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1993). 84.

Moving away from performance art, towards the end of the 1990s, Lee produced the *Majestic Splendour* series, using fish and sequins. The bodies of the fish were pierced with hairpins and decorated with sequined ornaments and beads. The beautiful, natural fish scales were augmented, patently unnecessarily, by the unnatural accessories. A feminist view was signalled by the application of sequins, which was regarded as women's work or as lowly handicrafts, like sewing or embroidery. In particular the reference is to sequined handbags and accessories, which were made by Korean women in subsistence employment during the 1970s, and, of course, also worn by other, more affluent women. As dissidents, Lee's parents had difficulty finding employment, so her mother made and sold sequined hair ornaments, often helped by her daughter.¹⁴⁷ Roe points to Lee's choices of materials and methods as probing the complex relationships of gender, class and power, including between female producers and female consumers.¹⁴⁸

Interviewed by Hans-Ulrich Obrist in 1998, the artist says that the central issue in these works is: 'what do natural objects signify about womanhood and femininity, particularly in Korean culture?' She says that in both East and West nature is idealized and seen as separate from human intervention or manipulation, legitimizing a submissive role for women as being natural.¹⁴⁹ Roe sees the *Majestic Splendour* series as debunking the view of nature as 'timeless, essential or virtuous.'¹⁵⁰ Lee Yongwoo agrees, commenting that the fish were bound to decay with time, leaving the cheap, artificial sequins, and sees this as a negative comment on veneration of the natural in traditional Korean thought, when it is the natural that spoils in the end.¹⁵¹ Roe also discusses the satirical metaphor of Lee's *Alibi* series, skewered butterfly pieces of the same era. A beautiful hairpin skewers a

¹⁴⁷ Fouser, "Lee Bul: The Question of Body Ownership." 57.

¹⁴⁸ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 108.

¹⁴⁹ Obrist, "Cyborgs & Silicon: Korean Artist Lee Bul About Her Work." and Rachel Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul," *Lee Bul*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Macgregor (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2005). 7.

¹⁵⁰ Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 108.

¹⁵¹ Lee, *Information and Reality*. 77.

butterfly, which is trapped in a silicone cast hand.¹⁵² These simple but poignant objects made visible the subtleties of the position of Asian women. The artist states that the butterfly also refers directly to Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, as well as to fantasies about Asian femininity.¹⁵³

The audience for *Majestic Splendour* would have been aware that the natural beauty of the fish must fade and decay, while the trashy ornaments would remain. The audience's awareness of the decay of the natural was reinforced by the gradual, but unmistakable, smell of the rotting fish. The use of the decaying fish engaged the audience's sense of smell, being the sense most difficult to ignore, though not usually preferenced in art. The artist also makes the point that it is not a representation: the smell is real.¹⁵⁴ When *Majestic Splendour* was installed at MOMA, New York, in 1997, the smell produced a great deal of controversy, raising the issues she was concerned with, and also having the effect of projecting Lee Bul onto the world stage. It was reinstalled in the Korean Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

The 1997 version of *Majestic Splendour* added even more artificial ornaments to the fish, now constrained by gold netting. The assemblage was crowned with white lilies, which, in the light of Lee's fluency in Western Art History, read as connecting to the Madonna or idealized woman; conveying innocence and overtones of mystical significance. The lilies also, like the fish, are a reminder of temporality.

During this phase Lee was not using her own body, or even a woman's body. However, Robert J. Fouser sees the fish as standing for the body of the artist herself.¹⁵⁵ He also offers insights into the wordplays in Korean. *Tomi* is the red snapper used in these installations, a fish familiar to a Korean audience. A word similar in sound, but with a different meaning, is

¹⁵² Roe, *Contemporary Korean Art*. 108.

¹⁵³ Obrist, "Cyborgs & Silicon: Korean Artist Lee Bul About Her Work."

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Fouser, "Lee Bul: The Question of Body Ownership." 58.

Toumi, meaning helpers; the girls employed at exhibitions, chosen for their appearance. Another message is given by a name from Korean folklore: the Lady Tomi, who committed suicide to preserve her chastity.

Another interpretation derives from the title *Majestic Splendor*, *Hwa-um* in Sino-Korean, which is Buddhist terminology for a way of contemplation, and from fish in Buddhist iconography, which represent a seeker, or alternatively the world of the living. So the meaning can be philosophical, derived from Asian religious thought, and also personal, from the artist's family history and her own memories.¹⁵⁶



Figure 14 Lee Bul, *Majestic Splendor*, 1995, fish, sequins, steel, glass, 1mcube.

¹⁵⁶ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 21.



Figure 15 Lee Bul, *Majestic Splendour*, 1997, refrigerated vitrine, gold thread, fake hair, fish, sequins, lilies, 210 x 130 x130 cm. Partial view of installation, Biennale de Lyon. This work was reinstalled at MoMA, New York, in 1997.

In the third phase of this decade of work, Lee returned to the explicit use of her own body in *Hydra (Monument)*, 1998. There were a series of processes and a variety of media involved in the realization of this work. First was the construction of the ornate and bizarre costume worn by the artist. Like the fish, the female body was decorated with all sorts of glittering ornaments with a central focus of three baby-doll heads on breasts and stomach. The crowning headdress was a pastiche of ‘oriental’, while the black fishnet stockings and boots are a universal signal of a ‘bad’ woman.

Having photographed the costume, the selected image was transferred to a vast, shocking-pink balloon. The balloon itself was of indeterminate shape with a sprinkling of monster appendages, as well as bearing the image of the monstrous woman. Once on site, the balloon was fitted with pumps, which surrounded it on the ground. The inflation of the balloon depended on the co-operation of the gallery visitors, who were invited to use the pumps to inflate the balloon. The size of the monument and the frequency of the

exhibit were dependant on the audience's involvement and the intensity of their efforts. Thus, the audience were implicated in the presentation of this questionable image of the Asian woman.



Figure 16 Lee Bul, *Hydra II (Monument)*, 1999, installation view, photographic print on vinyl, air pumps, 6 x 4.5m.

Throughout her career Lee Bul has stressed the place of the viewer. This has been a constant, despite the great variety of form of her work. In her own descriptions of her aims the viewer is always part of her calculations. It is her deliberate intention 'to provoke further discussions among her audience.'¹⁵⁷ In many cases the viewer plays an essential part. In an interview with Obrist, Lee states that she considers the art object powerless and unfinished until there is an encounter with the audience:

¹⁵⁷ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 17.

Part of my early attraction to performance was that it was an indeterminate form; the results were never known ahead of time. There was always an improvisational element to it, and this notion of processes contingent on audience participation, reaction and interaction carries over into my other works now, which are in some ways physically more object-orientated, but always try to involve the audience (not simply viewer) in some sort of response that goes beyond a distanced viewing; and I feel that I have to do this because the object itself has no power to exercise until it is encountered by the audience and what they bring to it.¹⁵⁸

In the balloon work, *Hydra II (Monument)*, the collective effort of the audience was a parody of the making of a monument. The audience were lured into humorous and absurd behaviour, with the possibility of inducing a self-critical awareness of complicity in many of the assumptions of society.¹⁵⁹

Hydra was a grotesque combination of Western and East Asian ideas of Asian women, visually represented by the bizarrely sexual costume worn by the artist herself when photographed for the image on the balloon.¹⁶⁰ In the *Hydra* series (1996-98), Lee was again using her own body, but in a different form. Kang Tae-hi, of the Korean National University of Arts, describes this image as a hybrid of 'queen, goddess, geisha and shamaness', based on the Korean fan-dance doll, a souvenir made for foreign tourists. He sees it as a parody of Orientalism as well as a comment on male power.¹⁶¹ Rachael Kent says the balloon monuments 'literally took the air out of the masculine culture of hero worship.'¹⁶² The woman on the balloon is the opposite of a delicate feminine image: she is more of a monster.

¹⁵⁸ Obrist, "Cyborgs & Silicon: Korean Artist Lee Bul About Her Work."

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Frank Hoffmann, "Lee Bul: Cyborgs and Karaoke," *Art in America* (2002). 125.

¹⁶¹ Kang Tae-hi, "Lee Bul's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*," trans. Doryun M. Chong, *Lee Bul: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, ed. Yasuko Furuichi (Tokyo; Kurashiki: The Japan Foundation Asia Center and Kokusai Koryu Kikin Ajia Senta, 2003). 36-7.

¹⁶² Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 7.

HI-TECH AND SCI-FI: cyborgs, monsters and karaoke.

The next period of Lee's career (from 1997) left behind the use of her own body, but continued both the themes from feminism and the monsters, while adding futuristic references and styling, recognizable to a turn-of-the-century audience from science fiction, movies, *manga* and *anime*. The styling, like these sources, was both futuristic and 'retro.' By this time, Lee was building up a team to assist her in the making of highly crafted constructions. She worked in her studio in Seoul and on site in the various cities hosting her work. She enlisted the help of specialists as required, for example in electronics for the accompanying video and sound.

One strand of Lee's treatment of 'the body' was her cyborgs, an abbreviation of 'cybernetic organism.'¹⁶³ Lee presented mechanical beings, echoing the form of the female human body, but missing heads and limbs. Her early cyborgs were glossy and brightly coloured blue or red silicone figures, supported by metal stands integral to the work. The series continued in chalk-white plaster, suspended above the viewer, for example, in vaulted underground spaces at the Istanbul Biennial of 2001. The artist explained that she was exploring two lines of thought in the cyborgs: 'the myth of technological perfection' and the traditional representation of femininity.¹⁶⁴

Lee's cyborg sculptures are 'superhuman,' but in her work are always incomplete, questioning the perfectibility and the future of the human body.¹⁶⁵ The cyborgs are machine-women hybrids, derived from animation images, such as *anime* and *manga* from Japan and Korea. In such stories the cyborg is a lonely figure, possessed of superhuman physical powers, but often brought back into the world of action by a male human, who she then devotes herself to assisting. Fousser sees the missing limbs as violently chopped off, as in the often extremely violent Japanese *anime*. However,

¹⁶³ Kurzmeyer, "Cyborgs." 22.

¹⁶⁴ Kim, "Les Deux Corps De L'artiste: An Interview with Lee Bul." 41.

¹⁶⁵ Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul." 15.

Lee herself sees the cyborgs as Western.¹⁶⁶ The drawing of the characters in these Asian-made cartoons is often a very strange combination of East Asian features with Western features, such as the girls with big, wide-open eyes.

As she created her cyborgs Lee had many myths, and literary and art historical precedents in mind. It is a subtle reading, but the artist has stated that her intention was that the poses of the cyborgs refer to iconic, idealized women from Western art history. At the same time she aimed to convey the ambiguous vulnerability of girls.¹⁶⁷ The white plaster and the height of the installed figures (requiring viewers to look up to the figures) also referenced classical sculpture. Kent writes:

The cyborg is for Lee a vehicle through which to explore diverse concerns that are not limited to gender alone. The subversion of clichés and stereotypes has nonetheless been a central aspect of Lee's practice to date, from Western concepts of Asian femininity to the representation of gender in art and popular culture.¹⁶⁸

Through the cyborgs Lee gathers in her net many issues of gender, at the same time pointing to wider human issues.

The second, parallel, strand of Lee's exploration of 'the body' in this phase of her career were her monsters, drawn in fine detail by a riotous imagination and then constructed in three dimensions. Some series of monsters were coloured and glossy, using a pink similar to the earlier *puppy on a picnic* body suit, or black silicone. Sometimes sequins crept back in. Others were stark white, such as the *Amaryllis* series (from 1999).

¹⁶⁶ Rhee Jieun, "From Goddess to Cyborg: Mariko Mori and Lee Bul," *N. Paradoxa* (2004). 10.

¹⁶⁷ Obrist, "Cyborgs & Silicon: Korean Artist Lee Bul About Her Work."

¹⁶⁸ Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 7.

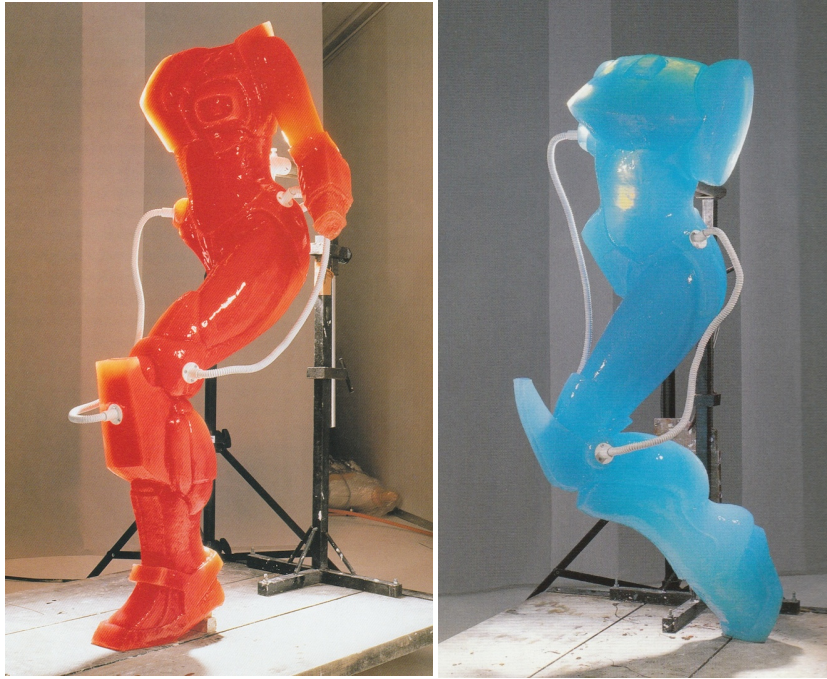


Figure 17 Lee Bul, *Cyborg Red*, 1997-98, silicone, paint pigment, steel pipe support and base, 160 x 70 x 110 cm.

Figure 18 Lee Bul, *Cyborg Blue*, 1997-98, silicone, paint pigment, steel pipe support and base, 160 x 70 x 110 cm.

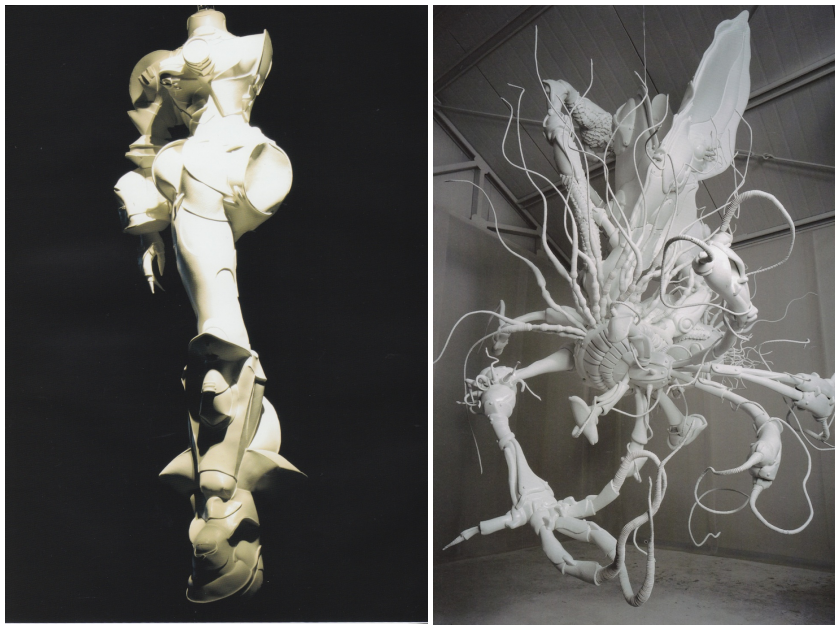


Figure 19 Lee Bul, *Cyborg W4*, 1998, silicone, polyurethane filling, paint pigment, 185 x 74 x 58 cm.

Figure 20 Lee Bul, *Amaryllis*, 1999, hand-cut polyurethane panels on aluminium armature, enamel coating, 210 x 120 x 180 cm.

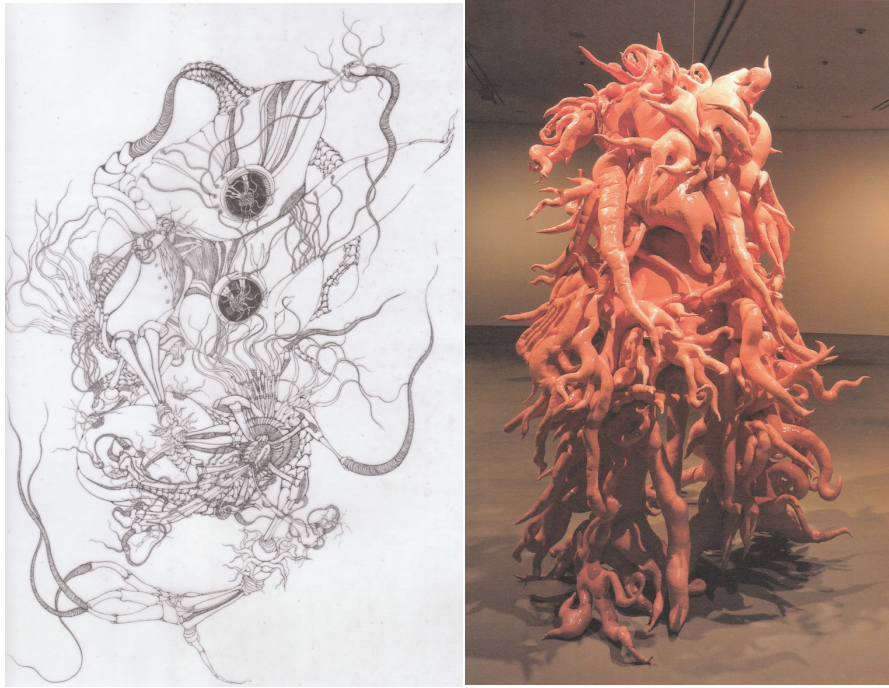


Figure 5 Lee Bul, *Monster Drawings No. 2*, 1998.

Figure 22 Lee Bul, *Monster: Pink*, 1998, installation view Artsonje Center, Seoul, fabric, cotton filling, silicone, 236 x 150 x 160 cm.

In the monsters series there is a clear link between drawing and three-dimensional realization. The drawings for the monsters were frequently exhibited alongside the sculptures. The monsters are, obviously, fictitious rather than representational. This sets the artist free to draw whatever she wants. Jean-Louis Poitevin sees Lee striving to break the bond ‘between acceptable forms of representation and stereotyped aesthetic emotions.’ For her ‘no reconciliation is possible’ between presentation and representation. He writes:

Lee Bul thinks of art as a form of struggle, not against this or that ideology but for the presentation of new situations, both sensorial and intellectual, affective and imaginary. For her that presentation must not fall into the sphere of representation.

Representation threatens to swallow up ‘the shimmerings of the void, which are, so to speak, the secret heart of all creation.’¹⁶⁹ Therefore, according to

¹⁶⁹ Jean-Louis Poitevin, "Convulsions: An Essay on the Work of Lee Bul," trans. John Doherty, *Lee Bul: Monsters*, ed. Franck Gautherot (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002). 59.

Poitevins, Lee embraces literal presentation in her three-dimensional work. Cedric Green links her assertiveness in this literal presentation with her undermining of traditional representation.¹⁷⁰ He calls Lee's work 'sculpturally embodied drawing,' saying that it has severed line from form and seeing this as a critical issue for drawing. The essence of drawing is 'its impossibility.' It is fiction. This is certainly true of Lee's drawings, throughout her practice.

Cyborgs and monsters are counterparts, made around the same time, in parallel. Like the previous fish series, the cyborgs and monsters explore the theme of 'the feminine body corrupted.'¹⁷¹ Categorizing these objects by the classic categories of sculpture, the monsters are both molded and carved, whereas the cyborgs are cast, in silicone or plaster. According to Fouser, cyborgs are the 'good woman' and the monsters are the opposite.¹⁷² Kent has a more expansive view:

Lee's recent monsters conflate the morphologies of plant, insect and machine to create hybrid beings that exist wholly outside of gendered parameters.¹⁷³

Lee Bul herself said, in 2003, that she always considered her cyborgs and monsters to be about 'exceeding the prescribed boundaries and touching upon the uncategorizable, the uncanny,' rather than fitting into the convenient, fashionable categories of 'gender and the body.'¹⁷⁴

The third strand of exploration of this period was Lee's development of karaoke pods, with accompanying video and sound works. The pods shared with the cyborgs and monsters a futuristic/ 'retro,' 'sci-fi' styling, but the body central to these works was the viewer's body. Here Lee returned to the

¹⁷⁰ Charles Green, "Lee Bul's Realism," *Artes Mundi: Wales International Visual Art Prize*, ed. Tessa Jackson (Bridgend, Wales: Artes Mundi and Seren, 2004). 58-9.

¹⁷¹ Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 7.

¹⁷² Fouser, "Lee Bul: The Question of Body Ownership."

¹⁷³ Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 7.

¹⁷⁴ Kim, "Les Deux Corps De L'artiste: An Interview with Lee Bul." 41.

audience involvement of her first period. The audience were once again an indispensable part of the work, suffering the indignities of being drawn into the performance.

The early pods, *Gravity Greater Than Velocity*, dating from the time of the 1999 Venice Biennale, consisted of a lumpy white refrigerator-shaped box, with pale pastel-coloured, padded velour lining, in which one or possibly two viewers could stand and watch a small screen and sing into a microphone. The singer closed the door of the pod and selected from a bank of well-known Western pop-songs, triggering the start of the karaoke background music and lyrics on screen. The background video was on a separate loop, so any connection between words and image was coincidental or a construct of the viewer's mind, sabotaging their sense of control of language or memories of romance. They emerged from the pod disenchanted.¹⁷⁵



Figure 23 Lee Bul, *Gravity Greater Than Velocity I*, 1999, polycarbonate sheets, steel frame, velour, sponge, karaoke equipment, LCD monitor 250 x 184 x 120 cm.

Figure 24 Lee Bul, *Amateurs*, 1999, photo shoot from the filming of the video.

¹⁷⁵ Kim Won-bang, "Power and Its Decomposition in Songs," trans. James B. Lee, *Lee Bul: In Medias Res*, ed. James B. Lee (Seoul: Ssamzie Art Project, 1999). 4-5.

The video and lyrics were also shown on a large screen outside, but with no sound. The content of the first video work, *Amateurs* (1999), was footage of a group of Korean schoolgirls, somewhat artificially dressed in short, tight-fitting uniforms, playing in a forest. One particular outcome of this incongruous combination of karaoke songs and the video images was sabotage of the commercial use of feminine beauty, continuing themes from earlier in Lee's career.¹⁷⁶

Over the next couple of years the pods were developed with much sleeker styling, reminiscent of desirable fast cars or spaceships and recognizable to the audience from film and television. The individual viewer reclined in a brightly coloured, lushly padded interior and the lid enclosed them. As they sang along to the words on their dashboard screen, the singer's voice was 'subtly enhanced using sound-optimising technology,'¹⁷⁷ During this time Lee and her team worked in San Francisco and Philadelphia constructing the exhibitions *Live Forever I* (2001) and *Live Forever II* (2002). This exploration of the pod concept included a fabric version, made at the Philadelphia Fabric Workshop.

The second video in the series, *Anthem* (2000), showed a night-time scene, moving along an elevated freeway in Seoul. Ahn Soyeon explains the political background:

the shabby old downtown of Seoul... Once a symbol of rapid growth but now synonymous with shoddy construction, *Chung-gye* Elevated Highway still serves as the artery of the city, surrounded by decrepit storefronts and crumbling apartment buildings...the anthem of the past turns into an elegy that is at once melancholic and loathsome.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Fouser, "Lee Bul: The Question of Body Ownership."

¹⁷⁷ Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 9.

¹⁷⁸ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 28.

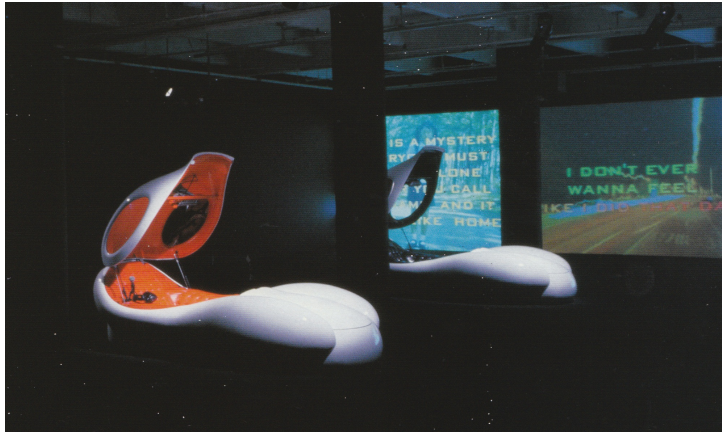


Figure 25 Lee Bul, *Live Forever*, 2001, fiberglass pods with acoustic foam, leather upholstery, electronic equipment, video projection, each pod 254 x 1525 x 965 cm.

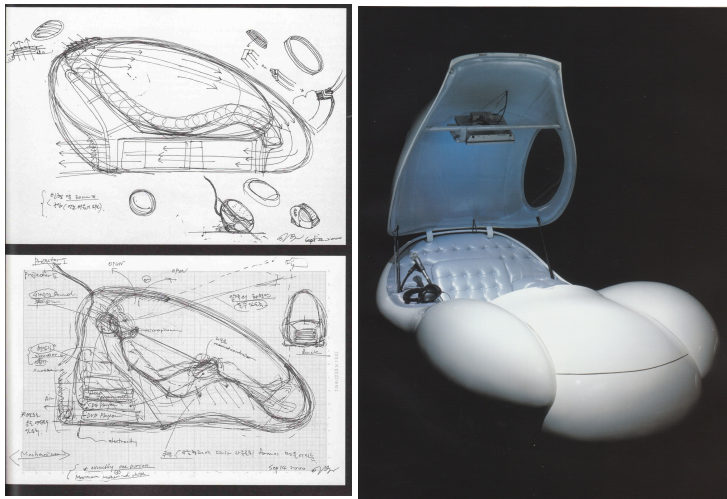


Figure 26 Lee Bul, conceptual sketches for the production of karaoke pod, 2000.

Figure 27 Lee Bul, *Live Forever III*, 2001, fiberglass pod with acoustic foam, leather upholstery, electronic equipment, video projection, 254 x 1525 x 965 cm.

The third video, *Live Forever* (2001), was shot in the Tonga Room, a Polynesian-themed hotel lounge in San Francisco, with a Filipino band playing nostalgic songs from the 1950s. The dancers are middle-aged, and, as the title suggests, Lee has set up yet another take on the human desire to overcome the limitations of the body.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 9.

The word 'karaoke' means 'empty orchestra', from the Japanese word *kara*, meaning 'empty,' combined with 'oke,' short for *okesutwa* (orchestra).¹⁸⁰ Normally, karaoke is communal. On an outing with friends or colleagues, individuals are persuaded to sing along to pop songs, everyone following the words on a large screen.¹⁸¹ Roland Kelts notes a difference between East and West in that karaoke in the West usually takes place in a large, crowded, noisy space, while in 'the urban Asia megacity' the setting is the more intimate situation of a small number of people in a soundproof box, *noraebang*, 'escaping the codified rituals of social interaction.'¹⁸² However, both are public situations.

Chui and Genocchio comment on karaoke:

Though the format varies, one constant is the intense fear and sense of vulnerability that frequently accompanies these amateur performances.

Lee Bul reverses this scenario by providing one-person size, soundproof capsules, avoiding embarrassment. Chiu & Genocchio point out that the public activity has been turned into a private activity, in contrast to 'a familiar strategy among Western artists' of making a private act public.¹⁸³

These accompanying karaoke videos were designed by Lee to induce feelings of dislocation of time and place. Viewers were taken in imagination to both the future and the past.¹⁸⁴ Nicholas D'Oliveira describes Lee's karaoke as immersive, escapist and narcissistic, allowing the individual a contemplative withdrawal rather than direct contemplation of the world. The

¹⁸⁰ Roland Kelts, "The Empty Orchestra," *Lee Bul: Live Forever: Act One*, ed. Lee Bul (San Francisco; Philadelphia: San Francisco Art Institute and The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2001). Unpaginated.

¹⁸¹ Chiu and Genocchio, *Contemporary Asian Art*. 147. In this overview book Chiu & Genocchio choose to focus on Lee's *Live Forever* karaoke pod series. They describe the rapid rise of karaoke as popular entertainment in the 1990s, initially in East Asia but spreading worldwide.

¹⁸² Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 9. and Kelts, "The Empty Orchestra."

¹⁸³ Chiu and Genocchio, *Contemporary Asian Art*. 147.

¹⁸⁴ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 23.

audience was made 'reliant on sensation and subjectivity,' replacing the traditional relationship between viewer and art object. D'Oliveira identifies this as a 'loss of site.'¹⁸⁵ Lee has explored and experimented with the place of the viewer throughout her career. Ahn draws a distinction between viewers' loss of distance from the artwork in Lee's earlier work, such as the provocative performances, and viewers' distance being regained with the cyborgs and monsters.¹⁸⁶ This question of distance was revisited in the karaoke pods, which constructed 'a strange merger of the viewer and the viewed.'¹⁸⁷

In Lee's karaoke pods a variety of issues were addressed. There was some continuing examination of feminist concerns and the image of Asian women in *Amateurs* (the schoolgirls in the forest). At the same time, in the construction of the karaoke pods, Lee rose to the challenge of male dominance in the building of machines.¹⁸⁸ The karaoke works continue the investigations started in the monsters and cyborgs of 'the complex web of relationships that exist between the individual, wider culture and technology in the present era.'¹⁸⁹ The videos made for *Live Forever* introduce concerns about the city environment, particularly in Seoul, which would be explored in the next phase of Lee's career. The artist was moving on from themes of feminism and 'the body' to wider concerns of Korean and international culture and history.

¹⁸⁵ De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry, *Installation Art in the New Millenium*. 53.

¹⁸⁶ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 23.

For many years Lee Bul exhibited worldwide, but was little seen in her native Korea. This situation was rectified with the exhibition in 2002 at the Rodin Gallery, Samsang Museum of Modern Art, Seoul. Curator Ahn Soyeon writes from a Korean point of view about this first showing in Korea of selections from several groups of Lee's work: *Hydra* (Monument), 1998; *Cyborgs and Monsters*, 2001 and 2002; and *Gravity Greater Than Velocity*, 2002 (a reconstruction of the 1999 original).

¹⁸⁷ Ahn, "Lee Bul: A Postmodern Woman-Warrior with a Double-Edged Sword." 27.

¹⁸⁸ Obrist, "Cyborgs & Silicon: Korean Artist Lee Bul About Her Work."

¹⁸⁹ Kent, "Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Lee Bul." 9.

THE BIG STORY

Lee Bul's work entered a new phase in 2005, exploring the human condition in the present era and in the future, and constructing works on a much larger scale. In these works there was extensive quotation, in words and visual references, to poets and writers from the whole sweep of the Enlightenment, as well as to nineteenth and twentieth century buildings and architects. The various sculptural uses of 'the body' were left behind in favour of architectural forms and bleak landscape. The questions raised were about the future of the human race, but the human figure was absent. The artist's underlying interest in utopias turning into, or revealed as, dystopic, came to the surface. Utopian yearnings were a major theme of the *Mon grand récit* works and the following architectural works exploring the history of the twentieth century. The constructions of this new phase were different in their form and scale from Lee's previous works. The artist described them as 'sculptural landscapes.' Both were constructed on the scale of a diorama, filling a gallery space. Also, like a diorama, there was no one fixed or correct viewpoint for the visitor.¹⁹⁰

During 2005 Lee made the twin works *Mon grand récit: because everything...* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, and *Mon grand récit: weep into stones...* in Basel. The title, *Mon grand récit*, can mean 'my big story,' an ironic personal view. At the same time, it can be the grand narrative of a collective story about the failed utopias of the twentieth century. Interviewed by Grazia Quaroni, in 2007, Lee said:

"Mon grand récit" is obviously a self-conscious tweaking of the term made famous by Jean-François Lyotard in his discussion of the impossibility of narrating history with a capital H. But it is for me a resonant phrase, with a melancholic echo, that seems to offer a broad but useful context for approaching certain ideas in my work.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Charles Green, "The Ice Age," *Lee Bul*, ed. Gregory Burke (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2007). 4-5. Green sees precedents in the museum diorama, as well as in cinema special effects and references to 1960's Italian movies.

¹⁹¹ Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul." 17.

The grand narrative of the history of modernity (from the Enlightenment on) is a shared history; by the twentieth century available around the world. Lee has a world-embracing view of history, literature and art and she draws on an extraordinarily wide range of sources. In the book accompanying the Govett-Brewster exhibition, Green argues that Lee is strategically opposing current art criticism, which champions the national, while she is promoting 'a determinedly global perspective.'¹⁹²

Lee Bul had been invited to the Govett-Brewster as part of the gallery's Artist in Residence programme. Before the artist's arrival in New Plymouth, the gallery team fabricated the basic construction on-site, working from the artist's marquette, and she completed the sculpture. Appropriately scaled architectural models had been commissioned from specialist model-makers and sent to the gallery. Working to the deadline of the exhibition opening, the paint was splattered on and the architectural models strewn around.¹⁹³

Mon grand récit: because everything... stood on three incongruous 'legs.' At tabletop height objects were scattered or piled together and topped with white resin and monster-pink paint, spilling over like icing. Over the wreckage swooped pale runways, piercing a small white and crystal mountain and ending in mid-air or plunging into snowy landscape. Above it, on a metal framework, sparkled the words, 'because everything only really perhaps yet so limitless,' a fragment of a quotation from Paul Bowles' novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, 1949; a passage comparing the boundless, unimaginable possibilities of life with the shadow of the unpredictability of death.¹⁹⁴

Concept drawings and photographs of earlier karaoke pods were also exhibited at the Govett-Brewster. One lonely W-series cyborg hung in the

¹⁹² Green, "The Ice Age." 4-6.

¹⁹³ From conversation with Bryan James (Fabrication and Exhibition team leader at The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery), 2011.

¹⁹⁴ Catalogue, "Lee Bul," (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2005).

background, indicating the linking theme of humanity's search for perfection in Lee's previous work and the new manifestation.

Central to the Basel installation *Mon grand récit: weep into stones...* was a towering white mountain, more vertiginous than any painted landscape. The mountain was surrounded by a helter-skelter, various white models of buildings and plywood runways; backed by another illuminated literary fragment, draped with fairy-lights on a tangle of black wire, all perched atop stainless steel rod scaffolding.



Figure 28 Lee Bul, *Mon grand récit: weep into stones...*, 2005, polyurethane, foamex, synthetic clay, stainless-steel and aluminum rods, acrylic paint, varnish, electrical wire, lighting, 2.8 x 4.4 x 3.0 m, installation view, Art Unlimited, Art 36, Basel.



Figure 29 Lee Bul, *Mon grand récit: because everything...*, 2005, wood, paint, glass crystals and synthetic beads, aluminium, foam, polystyrene, fibreglass, epoxy resin, silicone rubber, lights, 2.0 x 2.5 x 5.0 m, collection Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

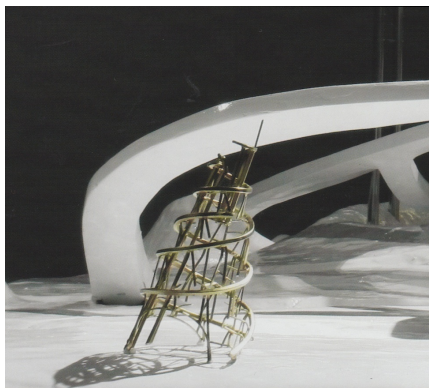


Figure 30 Lee Bul, *Mon grand récit: because everything...*, 2005, detail of Tatlin Tower, architectural model.

In these works Lee started to employ architectural references. She used miniaturization of objects that the viewer knows to be of epic scale.¹⁹⁵ There is a shift away from human scale to architectural models of what would be, in reality, massive buildings. For example, there was a tiny scale model of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, 1920, never built.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Green, "The Ice Age." 9.

¹⁹⁶ Masters, "Lee Bul: Wayward Tangents." 129.

However, there is also some intersection of the historical grand narrative with the artist's personal story. An example is the detail found in *Weep into stones*, of an architectural model of a Soviet style building. This was not only politically significant when built as the miners' union headquarters in Seoul, but was also, later on, the building where the artist had her own studio.¹⁹⁷

Rhana Devenport sees in these works the Romantic and the Sublime:

Lee Bul pointedly reinterprets the "heroism" of utopian vision and the monumental building projects it engenders as romantic folly rather than ideological emblem, conjuring—then instantly subverting through the disintegration of form and the proud topographical table display—references to two centuries of Romantic Sublime European landscapes.¹⁹⁸

Devenport's response illustrates the richness and complexity of meanings in such a work. She sees not only cognitive references to art history and architecture, use of language and utopian debate, but also sheer sensuality and visual superabundance.

Another aspect of *Mon grand récit: because everything...* was the use of colour, linked to memory. The artist claims that the distinctive pink was drawn from her memory of an incident she witnessed as a child. While gazing at 'baroque compositions of swirling cream' in a bakery window, she heard the buzz of an Italian scooter, 'with a shimmering fiberglass front that resembled a half-pod,' carrying a young man and a woman. Half enviously, she sensed they were lovers and was drawn as voyeur into the perfection of the scene, when suddenly beauty turned to horror, the woman was smashed into the window and the creamy contents splattered with her blood. The artist describes this confrontation with death and her own mortality and also her continuing attempts to remember the exact moment dividing beauty and horror. As a visual artist the memory was held as a memory of colour. Lee

¹⁹⁷ Masters, "Lee Bul: Wayward Tangents." 129.s

¹⁹⁸ Rhana Devenport, "Lee Bul," *Art Asia Pacific*. 47 (2006). 74.

also suggests that in our time our visual memories have been trained by the movies.¹⁹⁹

The artist's interest in memory spans from individual personal memory to shared memory and memory on a national or international scale.²⁰⁰ This incident also highlights, on a personal scale, the theme of utopia turning to dystopia.



Figure 31 Lee Bul, *Mon grand récit: because everything...*, 2005, detail.

¹⁹⁹ Lee Bul, "Beauty and Trauma," *Art Journal*. 59 (2000). 104-107.

²⁰⁰ Green, "The Ice Age." 7-9. Green gives a detailed account of the arguments of Proust's theories of memory and opposing views.

In 2007 Lee brought together much of her recent work in the exhibition *On Every New Shadow*, at the Foundation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris. The site of this exhibition was a glass and steel building by the French architect Jean Nouvel (1994) and the artist elected to make the building itself a key element of her exhibition.²⁰¹ Such a glass building, like Tatlin's tower in *Mon grand récit: because everything...*, expresses idealism and hope for the future, amplified by the quotations in the catalogue, for example from pioneer of Modern architecture Walter Gropius, selected by the artist. Utopian drawings of glass buildings by German architect Bruno Taut were the inspiration for one series.²⁰²



Figure 32 Architect Jean Nouvel, Grande Salle, Foundation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, 1994.

²⁰¹ Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul."

²⁰² Charlene Lau, "Lee Bul," *Canadian Art* 25.2 (2008). 84.

Masters writes that Taut ‘envisioned a utopian “alpine architecture” whose crystalline forms echo the shape of the landscape.’²⁰³ He sees these works demonstrating ‘Lee’s propensity to examine the past as a means of imagining the future.’²⁰⁴ The artist is particularly active in her characteristic cross-referencing of the ideas of different eras in the book made to accompany *On Every New Shadow*. The book is encrusted with drawings and writings from across the centuries.²⁰⁵ She uses words to refer to modern era utopian architecture in the titles of the *Bruno Taut* series and visual references in the framework support to the illuminated text of *Autopoiesis*, 2006.

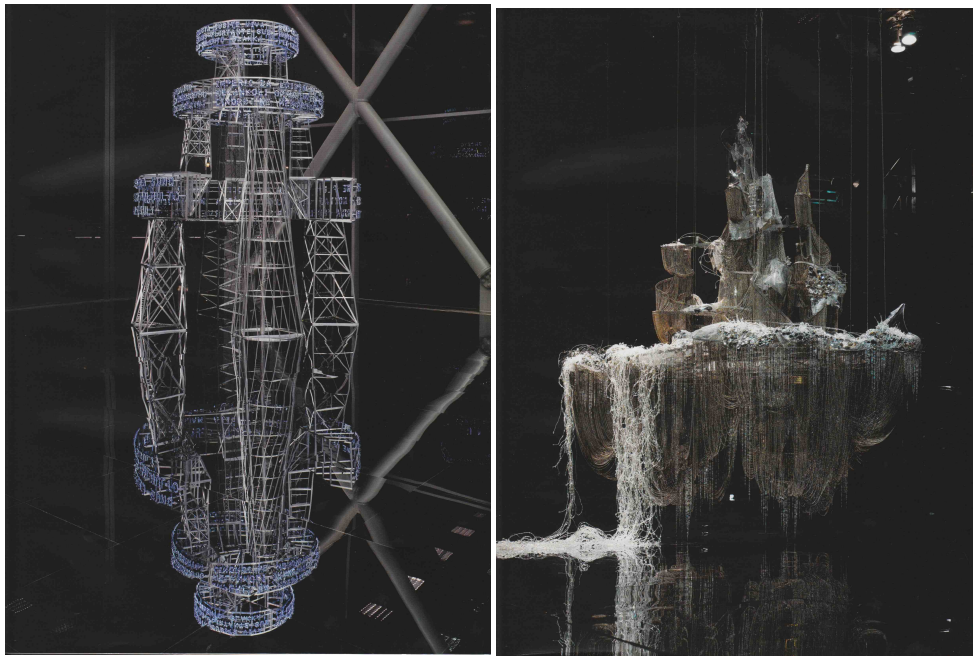


Figure 33 Lee Bul, *Autopoiesis*, 2006.

Figure 34 Lee Bul, *After Bruno Taut (Beware the sweetness of things)*, 2007.

²⁰³ Masters, "Lee Bul: Wayward Tangents." 129 and 132.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 128.

²⁰⁵ Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul."

The idealistic architects of the twentieth century, such as Taut, wanted the old cities of bricks and masonry to be replaced by sparkling crystal towers, visible at night even from outer space. Many of the twelve artworks in *On Every New Shadow* are best seen at night - coruscating lights in the darkness, succeeded by the glow of dawn - of a new era.

Some pieces were installed outside, such as *Aubade*, 2007, an abstract burst of fine lines of crystals, suspended against the backdrop of surrounding blocks of building. *Aubade* means a poem or piece of music appropriate to the dawn. Some pieces hung above the viewer inside the building, such as *Cinders and Embers*, 2006, the shape of a woman made of strings of crystals; the only figurative piece in the exhibition. In these works of fragile lights suspended in the gloom, Lee expressed both idealism and melancholy.

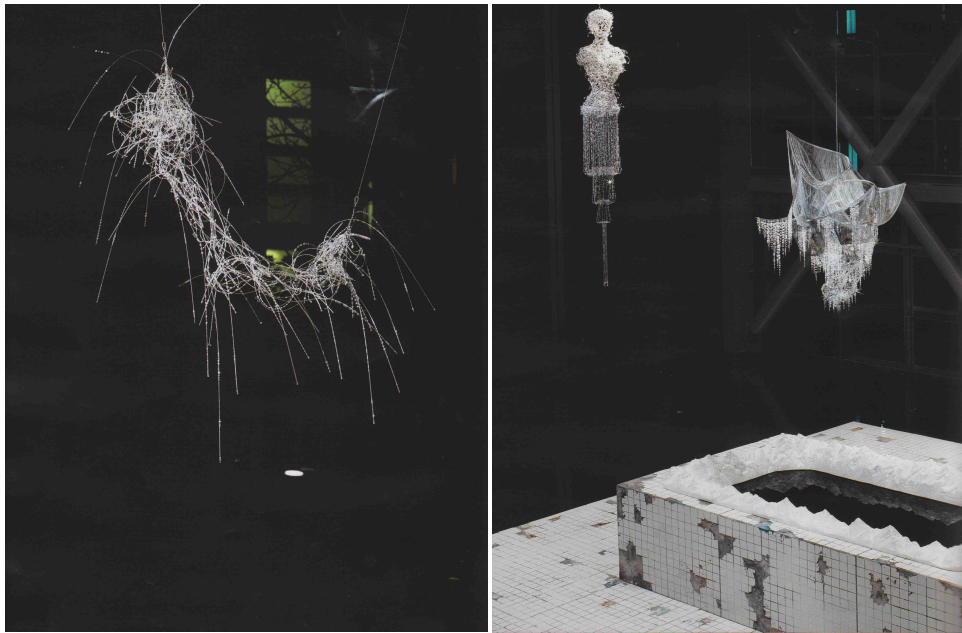


Figure 35 Lee Bul, *Aubade*, 2007.

Figure 36 Lee Bul, *Heaven and Earth*, 2007, with *Cinders and Embers*, 2006 and *Sternbau no 3*, 2007, above.



Figure 37 Lee Bul, *Excavation*, 2007, detail.

The floor of the main exhibition hall was reflective, with patterns of the routes chosen by visitors etched in the surface, while the works stood or floated above unsullied mirror. The palette was restrained; the most vivid being the black *Bunker* (*M. Bakhtin*), 2007, with the pale pinkish-amethyst, crystalline *Thaw* (*Takaki Masao*), 2007, trailing black beads, beside it. The use of crystal beads and glittering ornaments was unrestrained excess, in, for example, the *After Bruno Taut* pieces and the *Sternbau* group.

The mountains and runways, scaffolding, crystals and illuminated words of the earlier *Mon grand récit* works were developed much further in the sculptures of *On Every New Shadow*. Some new materials had crept in to Lee's repertoire. *Excavation*, 2007, explored many possibilities for human habitation, from tiny cave dwellings in a rock face to the elevated freeways emerging from it, topped off by a platform of fake fur. *Excavation* also featured undulations of tiny sequin-like mosaic. There was more distinct, though mutilated, mosaic tiling to the floor and the bathtub containing the black lake of *Heaven and Earth*, 2007. There were also more specific

references to Korean history, such as the dictator Park Chung-hee in *Thaw* (*Takaki Masao*) or the mythical beginnings of Korea in *Heaven and Earth*.

Lee Bul's experience of growing up in South Korea in the 1980s under various right wing dictators was expressed in some of the work in *On Every New Shadow*. A Korean audience would have recognized in the title: *Thaw* (*Takaki Masao*) the nickname for Park Chung-hee, a nickname he acquired at Japanese military school at Manchukuo.²⁰⁶ Purely by visual puns and precise juxtapositioning of work, the artist made comment on the association of the Korean dictator with the Japanese military. Viewers might have also connected the shiny black *Bunker* (*M. Bakhtin*), 2007, sited alongside, with Park's trademark sunglasses.



Figure 38 Lee Bul, *Bunker* (*M. Bakhtin*), 2007, with *Thaw* (*Takaki Masao*), 2007, in background.

²⁰⁶ Masters, "Lee Bul: Wayward Tangents." 132-3.

Heaven and Earth, 2007, would also read as political to Koreans. It referred to the mythical birthplace of the nation, the sacred mountain Baekdu, now in North Korea; 'a legendary mountain in disputed territory,' Baekdu Mountain contains one of the highest crater lakes in the world, known as Heaven Lake.²⁰⁷ Charlene Lau describes the tub as 'a vat of murky death,' and sees it also as an icon of the 35-year struggle against the Japanese occupation.²⁰⁸ However, although Lee works are always political and social commentaries, they also succeed aesthetically and the reading is not prescribed.

As at the Govett-Brewster exhibition, but on a larger scale at the Foundation Cartier, Lee deliberately granted the viewer some freedoms. The viewer had choice of entry point, choice of course around the work, and choice of viewpoint. Talking with Quaroni, the curator at the Foundation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, the artist outlined her concept of the relationship between artist, viewer and artworks:

Yes, it's not about presenting a single, fixed story. It can start anywhere at any point, and there is no beginning or end, only the cyclical, internal permutation of fragments. Visually, the most salient allegorical elements are architectural because utopian aspirations often surface in architectural forms. But I've mixed in other fragments as well: some are fictions, others, private memories and imaginings. And I've tried to avoid imposing a temporal structure as an ordering device on these elements. They must in some sense become loosed from historical time and collide with each other.²⁰⁹

It's true that I've brought together nothing that is unintended in these works. When I said before that I've tried to leave things temporally indeterminate, I meant that I didn't want to impose a structure that would present something tidy and unambiguous for the viewer. There are layers and there are associative strands among the various elements. It's been left up to viewers to make their own way through them.

Some may say that a lot of this, the references to Korean history, for

²⁰⁷ Masters, "Lee Bul: Wayward Tangents." 126 and 133.

²⁰⁸ Lau, "Lee Bul." 85.

²⁰⁹ Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul." 21.

example, is specialized knowledge that precludes those unfamiliar with it from entering into these works. But actually, in any period you find that there are certain crosscurrents, of ideas, politics, actions, that reveal unexpected correspondences and convergences between far-flung places and figures. They point to certain “universal tendencies,” for lack of a better term, that we can all recognize.²¹⁰

Lee’s work deals in ‘fragments’. She uses ‘architectural’ fragments because they make manifest utopian themes. Other fragments chosen are personal memories or fantasies. There are references to actual places and people or events and there are also ‘fictions.’ It is the artist’s intention to detach her fragments from their time, to allow for other associations to emerge. She wants to promote collisions of ideas. References to the particular can thus reveal the universal. She credits the viewer with the ability to make these connections and deliberately retains ambiguities for the viewer to navigate.

In a very productive career Lee Bul has moved from performance, to installations, to high tech, to architectural dystopias. She has been innovative in exploring presentation rather than representation. She has used many forms, but she has moved from one form to the next driven by idea rather than form or media. Despite being idea-driven, the physical expression of those ideas is always engaging and satisfying on a visual level. Although her earlier work was often categorized as being about gender issues and various approaches to ‘the body,’ she herself says that it was always about the wider human issues shown in her more recent work.

Sometimes Lee has vividly commented on the position of women in Korea. She refers to the history of Korea but she also presents universal themes and the history of the twentieth century and the future for humanity. The

²¹⁰ Quaroni, "Interview with Lee Bul." 23.

cyborgs offered an uneasy future for the human body and the architectural visions an uneasy future for human habitation. She has used architecture as integral to her installations and as an expressive part of her works.

Throughout her career Lee has maintained a focus on the place of the viewer. She references both high culture and popular culture and there is a wide-ranging complexity and imagination to hold the viewer's attention. She has offered choice of viewpoint and choice of interpretation. She has taken the viewer in close with the karaoke and restored 'distance' in the *Grand récit* works. In her more recent work she has presented the intersection of the 'grand narrative' and the personal. There has been personal memory offered and also collective memory.

CHAPTER THREE: flyingCity

Modernity is a constellation of situations created when things new and old interact with each other. Just as nineteenth-century Paris was the world's modern capital to Walter Benjamin, twenty-first-century Seoul, capital of Korea and major city in Asia, is the modern capital to the Seoul Arcade Project. Seoul is the city where one encounters unique phenomena. In Seoul, modernity is dislocated from the center of world history... In Korean, Seoul is at once a proper noun, a general term, and a mystic riddle. Seoul has no geographical boundaries. It is more than the capital of Korea, just as Paris was more than the capital of France... Its dreams are surrounded by those of Beijing and Tokyo and by transplanted traces of modernity... a historical place where postmodernism and globalism coexist...

No Myeong-u²¹¹

We discussed art and its potential for social change, its limitations and questionable efficacy, still in the belief that in the absence of an alternative, art has a valid social agency.

Mercedes Vicente, 2007²¹²

The artists of Flyingcity (sic) (in June 2003: Jeon Yongseok, Kim Gisu, Jang Jongkwan, Yu Seokgyu and Ok Jeongho) like to see themselves as spies, scrutinizing the modernization drive of South Korea and how it became stifled, figuring out how its cities can overcome this deadlock. They identify with the avant-garde artists who tried to indicate paths to the future. Yet, there is the melancholy realization that attempts to shed light on the actual problems of the city could be futile, given the fact that only those who are in power decide on its future: "While sweeping roads running through vacant lots, we overhear complaints from residents. We go into a deserted house and smash belongings left behind. We bow solemnly to the Olympic Apartments in Seoul that rise up in isolation. We set up a

²¹¹ No Myeong-u, *The Seoul Arcade Project and the Sopung Group*, Forum A. 29/03/2012.

²¹² Vicente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 16.

signpost pointing both to the Palace of Boys in Pyongyang (the name refers to children's education centres in various places in North Korea) and the World Trade Center in Seoul. We go inside an arts-and crafts shop in Insa-dong (a Seoul art area) and pretend we're taking pictures of the shopkeeper. We go round and round at night, consumed by fire."

*Jeon Yongseok, 2002*²¹³

In the most recent decade of her career Lee Bul increasingly focused on utopian/dystopic cities. Her sculptural work continued, but with individual pieces functioning as parts of larger installations and in the context of a debate about urban form. Another utopian approach to the urban environment was taken by flyingCity, an artists' collective, initially formed in 2001, active in the mid 2000s and now dispersed. Mark Kremer describes their practice as a combination of analysis of the urban and social fabric of Seoul with 'poetic' tactics, with antecedents in the 'urban drifting' of the Situationist International of the 1950s in Europe. The collective were in contact with 'kindred minds' globally and addressed an international audience through their websites. They were named flyingCity by founding member, artist Jeon Yongseok, inspired by an image from a documentary film about the expulsion of residents of a shantytown prior to the 1988 Seoul Olympics.²¹⁴

As a collective, flyingCity dealt in relational art, working with community groups. The media used by flyingCity included events, performance, drawings, models, video and photography. Other contemporary Korean artists, going back to Nam June Paik, have used these various media. However, in the practice of flyingCity the end-results presented were

²¹³ Mark Kremer, *The Postman Is a Genius: Experience and Imagination in Seoul*, 2003, Netherlands Media Art Institute: Montevideo/Time based Arts. The quotation is from Jeon Yongseok, 'Seoul Modernity and the Spy Paradigm,' in: *The Remembrance of a City, The history of a Space: An International Symposium on Alternative Space 2002* (Seoul: Insa Art Space, Korean Culture and Art Foundation, 2003). 62. 17/01/2012.

²¹⁴ Mark Kremer, *See Seoul, Then Die: The flyingCity Experience*, flyingCity. 2004. 20/06/2012.

produced collectively by the artists' group, and also, more widely, by the community groups involved. There was a definite political aspect to their activities. The collective was based in Seoul and worked and presented their results chiefly in that city, though they did also exhibit overseas. Most members of flying City were also regular participants at the Gwangju Biennale, a major event for Korean contemporary artists.

FlyingCity have some characteristics in common with Lee Bul. The artists are of a similar age and generation. The work of flyingCity is also very much focused on the urban. There is a common focus on utopian/dystopic cities, in particular commenting on the breakneck speed of the development of Seoul. Some forms occur in both practices, for example the flyovers of Seoul which Lee Bul used in her videos *Anthem* (2000), accompanying the karaoke work *Live Forever I*, and also in the curved ramps of *Mon grand récit* or *Every New Shadow*, which are echoed by the models made in flyingCity's 'Workshop with Children.'

Lee Bul's interest in memory is echoed by flyingCity's concern to record memories of Seoul, before too much was swept away by development. Although a collective and working with groups, they were, like Lee Bul, interested in individual memories and subjective experiences. In their case, recording of memories was based on the concepts of psychogeography. Also like Lee Bul, their work is a combination of the serious and the playful. The collective, however, are more overt in their desire to effect social change. Both Lee Bul and the artists of flyingCity are part of a global network of artists and curators debating issues of contemporary art and society.

FlyingCity were preceded by Forum A, with Jeon as the prime mover and spokesman for both. Forum A was formed in Seoul in 1997, with the aims of promoting active, serious and heterogeneous discussion of contemporary Korean art and vigorous criticism of the institutions such as museums, art education and art media, which he describes as having developed 'undemocratically and carelessly' under the particular historical

circumstances of Korea.²¹⁵ He sees artists as having the potential to focus not only on urban lives but also on the physical construction of cities. Korean cities were a physical expression of history under the Japanese colonial government, followed by the dictatorships and rampant modernization and capitalism. Many artists opposed military regimes in the 1970s and joined the Min Joong movement of the 1980s. Jeon states the ultimate goal of Forum A being ‘to transform urban spaces and use them as open space,’ in the particular sense of genuinely possessed by the masses.²¹⁶

The members of Forum A were young artists, curators and art critics in Korea. They met for seminars and panel discussions, they published a journal (both on and off-line) about alternative art activities and they contacted alternative art groups around the world, in order to cultivate ‘international bonding based on regionalism.’ To this end they hosted a workshop for alternative artists from other countries at the Gwangju Biennale. They saw particular significance in ‘avant-garde cultural experiments,’ especially in the context of international exhibitions and biennials. They felt that the art establishment was too bound to pure aesthetics, dealing in abstractions, and they argued for ‘concreteness and practicality in the art world.’²¹⁷

The theory underlying the practice of the flyingCity artists was drawn from psychogeography (psychological geography)²¹⁸ and ‘mental maps.’ They presented themselves on their website as ‘the Urban Research Group, consisting of artists who interpreted the city as a mental map and applied their interpretations to urban reality.’²¹⁹ FlyingCity took ideas developed by

²¹⁵ Jeon Yongseok, *Recontextualization of Urbanity Based on Regionalism*, Forum A. 29/03/2012.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Joseph Hart, "A New Way of Walking," *Utne*. 124 (2004), defines psychogeography as ‘a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities...just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape.’

²¹⁹ flyingCity, *Urbanism Research Group Web Site*. 29/03/2012.

theorists working in the 1950s, and applied them to contemporary Seoul. The collective worked with local people, using various means, such as drama, model-making workshops and installations, to draw out their perceptions of their environment and recording these in a variety of ways. The results were then presented in drawings, models, photography and video. There was an integral political aspect to this activity of trying to analyze, and possibly change, the effects of the rapid urban transformation of Seoul.

SITUATIONISTS

The originators of psychogeography were Ivan Chtcheglov and Guy Debord. Their ideas were developed within the Situationist International in the 1950s, starting as revolutionary social critique in the field of urban architecture. The central idea was to study how human emotions are affected by the physical environment. The extension of this was actual interventions into urban change. FlyingCity saw this study as widening to a variety of disciplines, such as film, with the aim of heightening awareness of space and time.²²⁰

Ivan Chtcheglov's seminal essay 'Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau' was written in 1953 and translated as 'Formula for a New City' (Grey, 1974) or 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' (Knabb, 2006).²²¹ He conceived the terms 'Unitary Urbanism' and 'the *dérive*' (drift),²²² terms developed later by Debord. Chtcheglov held out a vision of 'a completely novel

²²⁰ Kramer, in *See Seoul, Then Die*, writes that he finds video stills and text by flyingCity reminiscent of the tone of Debord's film *The Society of the Spectacle*.

²²¹ It is helpful to read the two English translations together, to be drawn in by the poetry in Grey, complimented by the precision of Knabb.

²²² Ivan Chtcheglov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," Trans. Ken Knabb. *Situationist International Anthology*, 1953. (Revised and expanded edition, Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006). 15 – 18.

conception of space.’²²³ He argued that the environment we grow up in ‘draws us irresistibly to the past,’ where we are able to feel alive emotionally, while the modern civilization of science and sophisticated machinery has left behind the human mind and has nothing to offer but cold, abstract art with ‘no story,’ and bleak architecture. He loathed the architecture of Le Corbusier.

According to Chtcheglov, as belief in absolute truth is displaced in the modern mind by the concept of relativity, it will be necessary for the civilization of the future to be supple or flexible, amused or playful. However, he raged against the banality of modern life, where people had become hypnotized by production and comfort. This is a critique of Marxism as having produced neither playfulness nor flexibility. Efforts to tame the harshness of nature and eradicate poverty had so overshoot the goal, he said, that given the choice of love or a garbage disposal unit young people would choose the machine.

Chtcheglov proposed an architecture that plays with time and space, creating ‘situations.’ Having supplied some minimum requirements of comfort and security, the buildings should be highly charged with emotional power, like the art usually consigned to museums or the old myths and spirituality. Chtcheglov’s short essay had a force and originality which inspired the Situationists, who picked up concepts such as creating a ‘situation’ and ‘drifting’.

Guy Debord was a central figure among the Situationists in Paris in the 1950s. He defined psychogeography as ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior (sic) of individuals.’²²⁴ There was a dual theme of serious utopianism and playful ‘urban

²²³ Christopher Grey, *Leaving the 20th Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* (London: Rebel Press, 1974). 15.

²²⁴ Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," Trans. Ken Knabb. *Situationist International Anthology*, 1955. (Revised and expanded edition, Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).

wandering' in Debord's exposition of psychogeography. He was notorious as a lover of both the art of conversation and drunkenness, and the views he expressed are sometimes to be taken as 'tongue-in-cheek.'

In his personal style of playful anarchism, Debord recommended approaching the study of psychogeography in a 'spirit of discovery,' in order to 'turn the whole of life into an exciting game.' He railed against the mediocrity of the 'diversions' of capitalism and wanted to undermine all that and create in people new desires and 'conceptions of pleasure.' This was to be done by the analysis of the feelings, vaguely sensed by most people, which are produced by urban environments, leading to exploration of more interesting possibilities. Debord proposed a concept of 'Unitary Urbanism,' in which all the arts contributed, without 'the old dominance of architecture' or the more recent 'sporadic application' of technology or science. He saw the use of psychogeographical maps as a means of escaping 'habitual influences' and as a first step towards a new architecture and urbanism.

A basic Situationist practice was the *dérive*, or 'drift,' which Debord defined as:

a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.²²⁵

The aim of *dérive* was to chart changing architecture and urbanism. It was not the pursuit of 'mere exoticism,' according to Debord.²²⁶

To engage in *dérive* it was essential to let go of one's usual activities and associates, in business or leisure, or habitual routes, and abandon oneself to the pull of the city itself; 'to emotionally disorientate oneself.'²²⁷ Debord

²²⁵ Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive." Trans. Ken Knabb. *Situationist International Anthology*, 1958. (Revised and expanded edition, Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).

²²⁶ Debord, "Theory of the Dérive."

²²⁷ Ibid.

believed that from the point of view of *dérive* a city has 'psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.' A practitioner of *dérive* would develop the knowledge of 'psychogeographical variations' and the ability to calculate their possibilities. Therefore the encounters found during a *dérive* would be not mere chance but an expression of the true nature of the city, revealed to the sensitive observer. However, in order to cut loose from habitual routes it was necessary to employ arbitrary rules or the methods of chance, such as choosing by lot.

The neighbourhoods of a city, as revealed by psychogeographical study, are definitely not administrative districts, but are based on 'centers of attraction,' the mental image in the minds of the inhabitants and the language used about the neighbourhood, as well as geographical data such as microclimates and economic activity. Debord envisioned the study of neighbourhoods of a small radius, such as would be mapped out by a resident during their daily movements within a city. This type of study was undertaken by flyingCity. *Dérive* could be undertaken alone or in small groups of 'people who have reached the same level of awareness.' The time spent on a *dérive* would usually be between two periods of sleep, but could be as long as two months.²²⁸

The practice of *dérive* is in the tradition of Baudelaire's concept of the *flâneur*, in the nineteenth century. The *flâneur* was a man of leisure who strolled the streets of Paris, visually savouring the urban environment; an observer, rather than a participant. He wandered randomly, on whim, sometimes almost dreamlike or free-floating, untroubled by business. There are overtones of voyeurism, the acquisitive, dominant, controlling male gaze and an interest in frequenting red light districts, but the concept of alertness to the cityscape and pleasure in a heightened awareness of environment transcends those criticisms.

²²⁸ Debord, "Theory of the Dérive."

More recent exponents are the Sopang Group, based in Seoul and linked to the flyingCity website, who took the Korean word *sopung* and developed it into a psychogeographical concept. The common meaning of *sopung* is picnic, but the Sopung Group extended its use to urban contexts:

...someone who *sopung*, which is the Korean word for “walk in the street,” does not own or appreciate the landscape, she creates it. Someone who *sopung* refuses the distance between subject and object, walks freely around the city, enjoys city sounds, and reads urban meaning. The consciousness of someone who *sopung* is like a piece of litmas paper. Someone who *sopung* is like a chameleon or a shaman, someone who records and prints a magic reading of Seoul.²²⁹

The pace of *sopung* is a stroll, not in tune with ‘modernist rationality and economy. Sopung people adjust their strolling speed according to the urban meaning.’ They walk slowly, out of tempo with the general populace, and offering the opportunity for others to notice and slow down too. The Sopung Group set up opportunities for this practice. They performed plays, collected data and recorded landscapes. They deliberately documented all five senses, avoiding an exclusively visual response to the urban environment. Thus, they recorded ‘smellsapes, soundsapes, touchsapes, and tastesapes’ and through all these searched for ‘hidden meaning,’ enabling them to compose ‘composite pictures of situations in Seoul.’²³⁰

Mental maps have been made of various major cities, famously Debord’s map of Paris (1955 or 6). In the 1960s psychogeography was studied in American universities and mental maps made of American cities, but this was more with the utilitarian aim of improving urban planning, which is different from the Situationist desire to explode the status quo.²³¹ Sometimes an arbitrary task was set, such as a straight-line walk across a city. The task could be playful or absurd, such as walking sideways, or

²²⁹ No, *The Seoul Arcade Project and the Sopung Group*.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Denis Wood, “Lynch Debord: About Two Psychogeographies,” *Cartographica* 45.3.

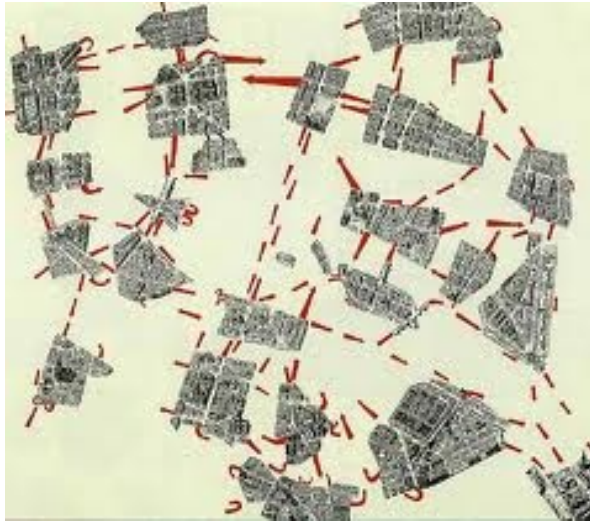


Figure 39 Guy Debord, *Psychogeographical map of Paris*, 1955 or 6.

using a map of one city to navigate another, for example following a map of Shanghai in Seoul.²³² Whatever the framework, the essence is that the mapper walks the city in an alert frame of mind.

Nowadays these journeys are often recorded and posted on-line. The style is informal, presented as a stream of consciousness, or dreamlike. The writer of the 'seoul series V' architectural blog is emphatic about leaving behind 'outdated Situationist politics' and exploring the city in a random and abstract way. The abstract qualities of the subway map are praised.

Unplanned wanderings are preferred: 'moving from one point to another and forgetting what lies in-between...turns the city into a virtual cloud of scattered situations.'²³³

It should be noted that these concepts all relate to an urban environment, such as Paris or Berlin, and, more recently, Seoul. A group of Situationists in 1923 tried applying their rules for walking in the French countryside, but found this unworkable.²³⁴ There is very little connection to walking for the purpose of appreciation of Nature. The goal is for the observer, within the

²³² *Seoul Series II*, 2010, deconcrete.org. 11/01/2012.

²³³ *Seoul Series V*, 2010, deconcrete.org. 11/01/2012.

²³⁴ Debord, "Theory of the Dérive."

modern city, to enjoy the exciting new life extolled by Chtcheglov and Debord, not subject to tedious, stereotyped behaviour patterns:

...the spaces of modernity were in fact marginal spaces, those in which the city's "new subjective experiences of exhilaration and alienation, pleasure and fear, mobility and confinement, expansiveness and fragmentation," were most intense.²³⁵

From the early days of the Situationist International there was intense argument whether the correct direction included aesthetics or whether the movement should be purely political. One of their main distinguishing features from other political, philosophical or literary movements in the 1950s and 60s was the value placed on aesthetic appreciation and sensitivity to the urban environment, but still they quarrelled about this issue.²³⁶ Valid or not, the aesthetic branch leads to the practice of psychogeography, continuing to the present day.

flyngCity

FlyngCity stand in this tradition, as active visual artists whose investigations are also concerned with socio-political life. They saw themselves as heirs of Chtcheglov and Debord and the Situationists in several ways. They mixed politics and aesthetics, analysis and poetics, and it was central to their practice to engage at grass roots level with working people. It is no surprise to find the flyngCity collective outside the art

²³⁵ J Tagg, "The Discontinuous City: Picturing and the Discursive Field," *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). 136.

²³⁶ In *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough (MIT, 2004). 491, T.J.Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, two former members of SI, accuse Peter Wollen of trying 'to turn the SI safely into an art movement, and thereby to minimize its role in the political and social movements of the sixties.' Tom McDonough shares their view.

institutions of Seoul, alongside workers, students and children, spotlighting social issues and using aesthetic devices to give a voice to the masses.



Figure 40 flyingCity, *Mapo Drift*, 2001, coffee spill over a map, 76 x 100cm.

FlyingCity combined the ideas of psychogeography with contemporary urbanism, in the context of the rapidly changing Seoul cityscape. They stated their commitment to ‘active research into the intricate relationship between the appropriation of capital and the resulting urban transformation.’²³⁷ The artists were motivated by an intense need for both themselves and the general population of their city to be aware of the effects of the political and economic changes of recent decades on the urban environment, and to visualize threatened development and the future consequences of these changes. Their style was playful, but the underlying feelings were both serious and melancholic.²³⁸

Jeon Yongseok, principal spokesman and theorist of flying City, sees two major and overlapping issues for artists in Asian countries: urbanity and regionality. Seoul is a prime example of a city which can be critiqued from

²³⁷ Defne Ayaş, *Flying City*, 2005, 9th International Istanbul Biennial. 11/06/2012.

²³⁸ Kremer, *The Postman Is a Genius: Experience and Imagination in Seoul*.

a ‘meta-narrative,’ global perspective, but in his view also needs to be considered regionally, with its alternative artists expressing the ‘difference’ of their Korean homeland. He coined the term ‘indigenous conceptualism,’ envisaging a development from conceptualism that draws on regional context, particularly in marginalized areas of the world. He is, however, aware of the various traps of regionalism:

...the conceptual framework of avant-garde urbanism based on concrete totality can provide a tool to avoid the dilemmas to which contemporary art is susceptible in the third world ...imaginative finishes on images of urban lives that imitate international styles spontaneously; escapism in the guise of folklore styles; creating and relying on fake tradition; dogmatic change of art due to its heavy exposure to political context; and, finally into the games of art history.²³⁹

‘Indigenous conceptualism’ is seen by Jeon as questioning the existence of ‘urban culture.’ He emphasizes that this is different from western conceptualism’s earlier attempts to ‘codify urban life styles,’ such as the methods of Chicago School of the 1930s.²⁴⁰ These issues have lost urgency in the West but are acute in Seoul, with many tensions around the very rapid redevelopment of urban space. These tensions are in both the material and the psychological conflicts of city lives. Jeon states that he agrees with suggestions that the Korean economic boom of the 80s pushed art away from space-time issues and towards ‘the non-material and the intangible, such as information and knowledge,’ with this phenomenon developing in parallel to regionalism.²⁴¹

Forum A saw themselves in the tradition of the ‘western leftist modernist method of questioning the significance of the city.’ Developing from that position, Jeon stresses the need for alternative artists to get out of the art institutions into practical, concrete urban life. He advocates using conceptualism to question urbanity ‘from a realist point of view.’ Like

²³⁹ Jeon, *Recontextualization of Urbanity Based on Regionalism*. List of dilemmas based on the work of Luis Camnitzer.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Debord he wants to combine pleasure and politics, play and social criticism. In their study of Seoul, Jeon identifies Forum A as following Western urban theorists such as Zimmel and Benjamin in 'the fragmenting method,' focused on the psychological conflicts of city lives, but transformed into a third world version. He suggests suitable media would be 'reflective paintings,' documentaries, ready-mades and also, surprisingly, minimalism.²⁴²

It was important to Jeon to understand the history of the avant-gardes in Europe, such as the political and social impacts of the Situationists International and of the 1968 student movements, commenting that he was helped in his comprehension by his analysis of modern Korean history. In his opinion, Korean views of the European avant-garde have not been true to the original ideas, but he notes that depoliticizing of social concerns in the 1990s has led to reassessment of the historical avant-gardes.²⁴³

In his 'Agenda of the Urbanism Group Flying City' Jeon takes from Debord a definition of urbanism as the fact of capital accumulation and post-world war consumerism, calling the synthesis 'the society of spectacle.'²⁴⁴ He argues that the social progress desired by activists starts with insightful observation of urban spaces. He envisages this observation being revitalized by conceptual art, although in a looser form than Western conceptualism. He wants conceptualism to be 'demystified' and properly functioning to criticize systems and, ambitiously, 'to recover autonomous consciousness for the third world.' He admires what he calls 'indigenous conceptualism' in Eastern Europe, South America and Asia. He wants art to be 'transgressive' without being coercive:

We support art that criticizes social issues and an urbanism that exudes the tension, energy, and shock of modern spaces, and

²⁴² Jeon, *Recontextualization of Urbanity Based on Regionalism*.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Jeon Yongseok, *Agenda of the Urbanism Group 'Flyingcity'*, Forum A. 26/05/2012.

changes our lives through information technology and the superstructures of the cityscape.²⁴⁵

In the flyingCity manifesto ‘intellectual criticism becomes a sensual dimension combining pleasure and politics,’ a view echoing Debord.

In Korea, Jeon sees the redevelopment of city spaces becoming regionalized, in the sense of using a ‘certain set of unchanging symbols within a specific community,’ He criticises regionalization used merely an artistic tool, decorative and concealing proper discussion of urbanism. On behalf of flyingCity he proposed an alternative: ‘rediscovering and resocializing aspects of urban life,’ with the aim of moving from the abstract to the concrete. However, he sees the collective as artists using ‘aesthetics devices,’ rather than ‘an association of activists,’ but with the distinct possibility that the artists will become social activists.²⁴⁶ For Jeon, art and social-political activity are inextricably intertwined.

From 2001, flyingCity worked in direct social engagement with local communities, building relationships with the residents and focusing on the local environment. They put on impromptu performances, set up temporary parks and initiated ‘mumbling.’²⁴⁷ Research with social groups was turned into diagrams representing the networks found.²⁴⁸ These could be two-dimensional or three-dimensional. The maps were developed by collaboration between local people and the artists. *Mental Map* (2001-2003) was an investigation of ‘the unconscious level,’ inviting residents to draw psychological maps of their area and future maps of how they would like to live.

In the *Mental Map* projects, ‘Urban Planning Play’ and ‘A Workshop with Children’ (2001-2003) the participants ranged from kindergarten and

²⁴⁵ Jeon, *Agenda of the Urbanism Group 'Flyingcity'*.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ flyingCity, *Urbanism Research Group Web Site*.

²⁴⁸ Walter and Mcbean Galleries, *Flyingcity (Yong-Seok Jeon and Jang-Jong Kwan):::: Live and Work in Seoul*, 2006, san francisco. art. institute. 13/10/2011.

elementary school children to art college students. FlyingCity found that the children's ideas were mainly about their homes and schools, while the fine art students attempted to express speed and movement. The results were 'a mental landscape of Seoul observed intuitively.'²⁴⁹ The initial drawings looked somewhat like abstract expression, but the later results showed three-dimensional architectural structure and appreciation of site.²⁵⁰ However the main point of the drawings and models is to express the feeling and meaning of place – the psychogeography - as well as aspirations for urban planning and political change. It is noticeable that the children's cardboard models with curved ramps are surprisingly reminiscent of Lee Bul's *Mon grand récit* or *Every New Shadow* work. However, the main point of the drawings and models is to express the feeling and meaning of place.



Figure 41 Mental map from *Urban Planning Play*, 2001 - 2003.

²⁴⁹ flyingCity, *Urbanism Research Group Web Site*.

²⁵⁰ flyingCity, *Mental Maps and Urban Planning Play*, 2003. 11/01/2012.



Figure 42 Drawing from *Urban Planning Play*, 2001 - 2003.

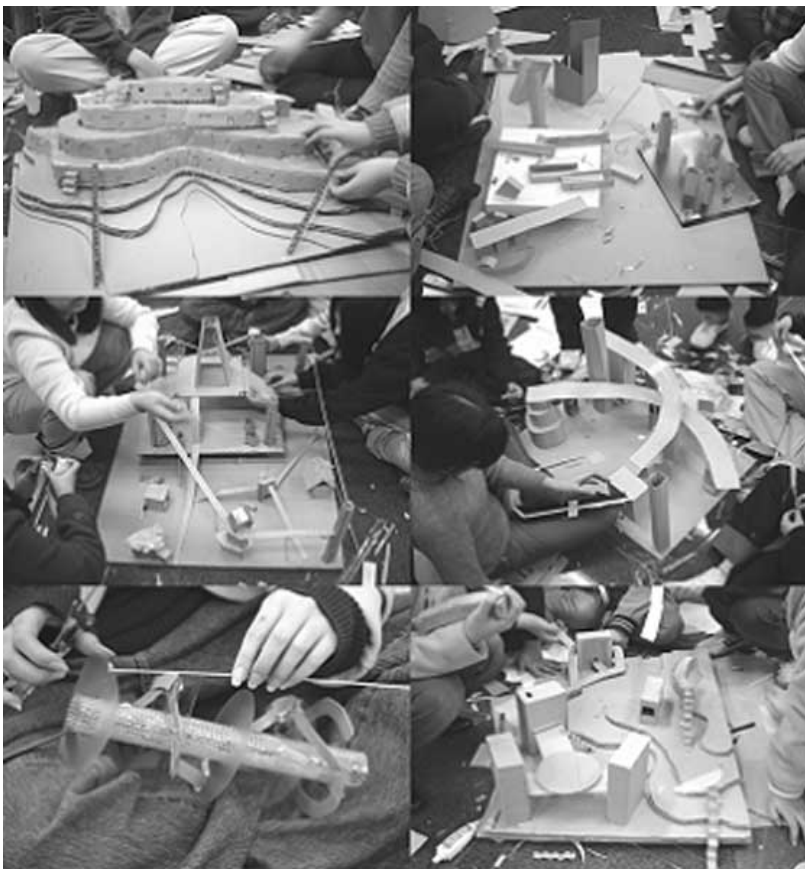


Figure 43 Workshops with children 2001 – 2003.



Figure 44 Models 2001 – 2003.



Figure 45 Models from *Urban Planning Play*, 2001 - 2003.

From the same era, *Looking Down* (2003) is a series of large-scale digital prints, 900mm in height and about 3 metres long. Each shows a vast expanse of new apartment blocks along a Seoul skyline, dwarfing older neighbourhoods. The towers stand straight and tall; gleaming against a grey sky. The older, mixed residential areas are spread out ‘higgledy-piggledy’ below, in an assortment of drab colours, with the odd splash of blue roof.



Figure 46 flyingCity, *Looking Down* #3 *Redevelopment Scene near Bongcheon Crossroad*, 2003, digital print, 90 x 292cm.



Figure 47 flyingCity, *Looking Down* #4 *Redeveloped Site at Bongcheon-dong*, 2003, digital print, 90 x 300cm.

FlyingCity saw this urban landscape as a failure of urban planning, evoking ‘two contradictory responses to Seoul: disgust and captivation.’²⁵¹ They described the landscape as ‘too thin,’ and they explained that they chose to use large format digital photography as their medium for recording ‘the thinnest landscape from a (sic) abstract point of view.’ These large-size

²⁵¹ flyingCity, *Looking Down*, 2003. 29/03/2012.

images are composites, not a view as seen by the human eye. They also said that they used mental maps to help them to grasp the city's 'overwhelming scale and views:'

Mental maps are a city's psychogeographical, subjective record. By recombining texts and images, they record psychological shocks of a specific place, which leads to a new understanding of space and time.²⁵²

Mental maps were used by the collective in some situations to reveal 'the meaning of urban symbols', but photos, text, statistics and geographical techniques were also used.

This photographic documentation was one aspect of the collective's practice. They had also done site specific performances and utopian city planning, expressing their interests in both geography and culture. They aimed to stimulate the imagination and action of those involved in the neighbourhoods focused upon in their work.²⁵³



Figure 48 flyingCity, *Power of Cheonggyecheon*, 2003, 100 x 447 cm.

Power of Cheonggyecheon, 2003, is another record of flyingCity's interest in the urban development in Seoul. It also is a large-scale digital print, a metre high and over four metres long. It shows the small workshops of Cheonggyecheon district. Along the length of the photograph are three receding views down alleyways, curving intriguingly out of sight. On the

²⁵² flyingCity, *Urbanism Research Group Web Site*.

²⁵³ Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 90.

left a group of three men pose for the camera, while in the other two alleys men go about their business. Workshops are piled high with metal parts and in the cavernous depths can be seen a few other faces, also looking straight at the camera. The colours are drab, except for a few signboards and an umbrella in the primary colours. Not much sky is visible and what can be seen is crossed with wires. On the top left an overhead freeway can be seen.

The Cheonggye stream used to run through a downtown district of small shops and factories. In the 1970s this creek was concreted over for the construction of a freeway overpass. A few decades on, the freeway was demolished and a major beautification project undertaken by the city (completed in 2005). An artificial creek was constructed with the aims of creating an attractive tourist destination and improving the quality of life for residents of Seoul. High rises were planned for the district. Once again, the workshops and the residents were threatened with displacement. These small factories of Cheonggyecheon were a parallel economy alongside mass production, filling a niche market for short run products, such as replacement parts, samples or inventions - a creativity that resonated with the artists.²⁵⁴

FlyingCity researched the social groups of the marginalized workers and produced diagrams of the production or networks between the workshops in the Cheonggyecheon area. In the *Chunggye Mini Expo Project* (2003) flyingCity set up small stores for manufacturing machine parts and then mapped the networks of relationships between stores. These stores also became temporary exhibition spaces, displaying mock-ups of products accompanied by written anecdotes.²⁵⁵

Having listened to the stories of the street vendors, flyingCity decided to present them not as an angry, noisy protest against the city government's

²⁵⁴ Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 92.

²⁵⁵ Jeon Yongseouk, "Drifting Producers." *Art and Social Change*, ed. Will Bradley & Charles Esche, 2007.

development policy, but rather in ‘a form suggesting quieter voices.’ In *Talkshow Tent* (2003) eleven tents were set up, accompanied by flags styled like the parasols used by the street vendors. A talk show-like event was held in the tents. The street vendors were eventually evicted by force on 30th November 2003.²⁵⁶

During 2003 flyingCity created a solo exhibition, titled *Invitation to Drift*, clearly referring to the Situationist term, but adding a fresh meaning of the flexibility of the production system networks in Cheonggyecheon. It was said that you could source ‘all things’ in Cheonggyecheon. It is the production methods that ‘drift,’ responding to unexpected orders. Jeon sees these as ‘postmodern,’ and possibly also ‘pre-modern,’ but not part of the modernization imposed by the government.²⁵⁷ That exhibition was then taken to Prague in 2005.

The same year the collective participated in the Istanbul Biennale. Their installation *All-Things Park* was an imaginary structure accompanied by maps and diagrams and interviews with the metal shop workers and the street vendors, distilling flyingCity’s investigations in Cheonggyecheon.²⁵⁸



Figure 49 flyingCity, *All-Things Park*, 2005, installation, Tobacco Warehouse, Istanbul.

²⁵⁶ Jeon, "Drifting Producers."

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ayaş, *Flying City*.

A comparison was drawn between Seoul and Istanbul, because although the two cities are in different parts of the world they are both ancient cities undergoing rapid modernization. The Biennale material referred to psychogeography and the Situationist movement and, appropriately, although the subject matter is serious the presentation was described as ‘playful’:

At the heart of the collective is an ongoing commitment to active research into the intricate relationship between the appropriation of capital and the resulting urban transformation.²⁵⁹

The collective were clearly still presenting themselves as acting out the theory of the Situationists and psychogeography. Even the word ‘drift’ was used gratuitously in the description of the work, recalling Debord. However, the artists were described as being interested not so much in the urban spaces as in ‘the vendors’ economic adaptability to their urban reality.’ The installation was described as ‘flexible and creative, yet somewhat chaotic’ - a fitting representation of the behaviours of the community.²⁶⁰

The collective went on to propose alternative redevelopment plans for Cheonggyecheon. Some ideas came from a book about the survival of handicraft industries and small family businesses in Italy. The term ‘drifting’ in this context was used to denote unexpected and creative adaptation, enabling survival in a changing economy. The image was later re-presented as *Drifting Producers*, in 2006.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Ayaş, *Flying City*.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Walter and Mcbean Galleries, *Flyingcity (Yong-Seok Jeon and Jang-Jong Kwan)::: Live and Work in Seoul*.

ACTIVATING KOREA

In the nature of collectives, flyingCity was part of ever changing associations of artists, for example as participants in the exhibition *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*, held at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, New Zealand in 2007. This show was jointly organized with Insa Art Space of the Arts Council Korea. Eight individual artists and four collectives presented work. These artists were all Seoul-based.

The four collectives taking part in *Activating Korea* were flyingCity, mixrice, Cheonggye Design Center (CDC) and JNP Production. Of the artists in these collectives, Lim Minouk of CDC and Park Chan-Kyong of JNP also participated as solo artists. Jeon Yongseok was a member of three of the collectives at that time.²⁶² There was constant exchange of ideas and personnel, based around the core members of each collective.

The collective mixrice focused on migrant workers in Korea, mainly from South and South East Asia. They worked in collaboration with the foreign workers, with activists and with artists, researching and proposing ‘new models of cultural and artistic practices,’ and striving to enable a voice for the migrant communities. Migrants often live among Koreans, but communication is limited by barriers of language and culture. Mixrice aspired to promote tolerance and diversity through their projects.²⁶³

In 2002 mixrice ran a visual arts class for foreign labourers working in Korea. The initial aim was to counter expressions of pity towards foreign workers in media reports and among the Korean public, which activists, and

²⁶² **flyingCity** - goals defined 2001 - Jang Jongkwan , Jeon Yongseok, *Kim Gisu*, *Yu Seokgyu*, *Ok Jeongho*.

mixrice - formed 2002 - Im Heungsoon, Jang Hijeong, Jeon Yongseok, Cho Jieun, Yang Chulmo.

Cheonggye Design Center (CDC) - formed 2007 - Jeon Yongseok, *Kim Bohyung*, *Lim Minouk*.

²⁶³ Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 134.

the foreign workers themselves, find unhelpful stereotyping and an oversimplification of their problems. Mixrice made videos about the foreign workers and they were enabled to speak about their experiences and concerns on video diaries.²⁶⁴ The title of their exhibition *Lucky Seoul* (2002) came from a popular song of the 1950s expressing enthusiasm for the rebuilding of Seoul as a modern city. Map drawing of Seoul was linked to other cities with different cultural backgrounds.²⁶⁵

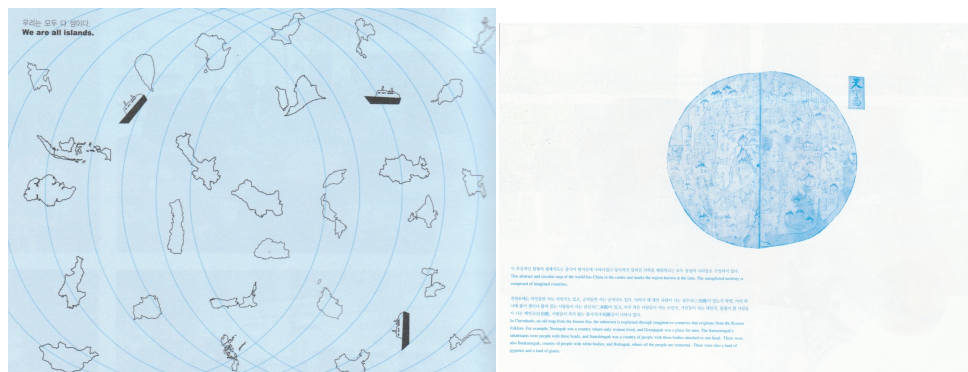


Figure 50 mixrice, *We are all Islands*, 2007, poster 59 x 84.1 cm, front and back.

The Cheonggye Design Center (CDC) collective evolved from flyingCity's projects in the Cheonggyecheon district of Seoul. Inspired by the energy of Cheonggyecheon, the design centre was set up with the aim of recreating networks between artists and craftspeople in that neighbourhood. The artists' collective proposed:

to design objects following key ideas such as reinvention through repeated copying, collective cleverness, amusement and playfulness, DIY, appropriation, unruly systems, improvisation, intuition, hybridity or mutation.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Insa Art Space, *Lucky Seoul-an Exhibition for the Networking of Alternative Spaces*, 2002. 13/10/2011.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 119.

In New Plymouth, the collective CDC linked up with local designers to hold a workshop appropriate to the New Zealand context and also in accord with CDC objectives. The result was *100% Unpure*, a ten-day design workshop for local designers, artists and students, at the Govett-Brewster and the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki (WITT). The stated aims were to address local needs and to use local materials and local traditions of design. Differences would be celebrated. The products were to be relevant to their context, in New Plymouth as in Cheonggyecheon.

The title *100% Unpure* referred to a long running Tourism New Zealand advertising campaign, *100% Pure*. It questioned the truth of that claim; a claim directed at overseas visitors. It also questioned the New Zealand sense of identity. As both the exhibition and this design workshop were joint ventures between Koreans and New Zealanders there was a complex web of relationships going on. The New Zealand designers, Tim Wigmore and Che Rogers, wanted to protest the lack of truth in the ‘clean-green image,’²⁶⁷ while the Koreans, Jeon Yongseok and Kim Bohyung, were coming from human impact of a different order of magnitude in Seoul.

The emphasis of the workshop was on ‘knowledge achieved by trial and error and handed down over time, invented and improved on through changing needs in everyday life.’ This statement implies deliberate rejection of advance through cold, hard, scientific research or remote authority, named ‘major knowledge’ and labelled ‘institutionalised’ and ‘systematised.’ Set against this was the concept of ‘minor knowledge.’ This was called ‘psychogeographical information.’ such as the location of specific resources, ‘the ambience of a specific place at a specific time of the day,’ ‘popular remedies’ and personal memorabilia.²⁶⁸ Collective action and relationships were valued above the lone individual.

The objects gathered and the design proposals were displayed at the art gallery alongside flyingCity’s large-scale images, *The Power of*

²⁶⁷ Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 122-3.

²⁶⁸ Vincente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. 118.

Cheonggyecheon and *Looking Down*. The vernacular objects included New Zealand icons, such as number eight fencing wire, corrugated iron, sheds and jandals. These were laid out, spaciouly, in the gallery, some supported by large grey river-stones. Attached to the shed walls and gallery walls were sheets of diagrams about projects and contrasting boards of plastic trash. Brown paper bags bore crudely written words. Handmade garments hung alongside ‘high-vis’ jackets.



Figure 51 Cheonggye Design Center, *100% Unpure workshop*, 2007, view of installation.



Figure 52 Cheonggye Design Center, *100% Unpure workshop*, 2007, view of installation.

The Power of Cheonggyecheon had a wall to itself in the *100% Unpure* workshop space, facing the *Looking Down* images. These earlier photographic works by flyingCity, from 2003, were requested by Mercedes Vicente (the Govett-Brewster curator) quite late in the planning of *Activating Korea*, in order to convey visually the context of urban development in Seoul, especially for the New Zealand audience. However Vicente was concerned that the documentation should not be used in 'an illustrative way,' presumably wanting images that would stand as artworks in their own right.²⁶⁹

There was a strangeness about this study of collective action in Korea being held in New Plymouth. The low population density, as well as the cultural differences, meant that the Korean artists' usual ways of engaging with their audience were not fully workable. However, a benefit of being in New Zealand was that they were able to be more outspoken. For example, the title of the show included the phrase 'collective action,' which was considered to be too left wing for a public institution in Korea.²⁷⁰ In his review for *Journal Bol*, Jon Bywater, from Auckland, was conscious of addressing a variety of audiences, but most importantly the exhibition's 'virtual audience in Korea'. Bywater sees the title as positioning the exhibition as both a catalysts for social change and as 'a new "tide" or wave of art making.'²⁷¹

Korea is an example of increasing prosperity in Asia. It has become rich enough to sometimes be the 'baddie' abroad and to struggle with the issues of migrant workers entering Korea. Against a backdrop of economic crises in the West, current relatively successful economies are Korea, Turkey and some South American countries, and in such places contemporary art is blossoming in fresh manifestations. According to Jeon Yongseok, the

²⁶⁹ Vicente, *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*. Email Dialogue between the New Plymouth and Seoul, curators, designers and artists. 122.

²⁷⁰ Ibid. 16.

²⁷¹ Jon Bywater, "Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action," *Journal Bol* 007. Winter (2007).

economic boom of the 80s pushed art away from space-time issues and towards ‘the non-material and the intangible, such as information and knowledge.’²⁷² Today Korea is a self-assured part of the global culture of video and information technology.

Returning to Korea, flyingCity took part in the Anyang Public Art Project 2007, at the Anyang Art Park, near Seoul. In 2008 they took part in *Art and Capital*, an international seminar and exhibition at Alternative Space Loop in Seoul. The same year they participated in an exhibition in Stockholm, titled *On Cities – Maps, Cars, People and Narratives in the Urban Environment*.



Figure 53 mixrice, *Migrant Flag*, 2008, banner, helium gas, ad-balloon.

Mixrice went back to Korea and made a balloon work for the 2008 Multicultural Festival Migrants Arirang. It consisted of messages and icons from various Asian countries, floating in the sky as a new type of flag.

Individual members of collectives continue separately or in new collectives. For example Lim Minouk (b. 1968 Daejeon, Korea) collaborated as a member of CDC and co-curator at New Plymouth, but also has an individual artistic practice, continuing mainly in film and video works. In 2011 Lim’s *The Weight of Hands* (2010) was shown at the Seoul Museum

²⁷² Jeon, *Recontextualization of Urbanity Based on Regionalism*.

Of Art (SeMA) as part of an exhibition of 45 artists by Media City Seoul, under the theme of ‘trust’. Her work was an infrared video examining South Korea’s rapid urbanization.²⁷³ Jeon Yongseok was still active in 2011 as a forum speaker on issues of urbanism.

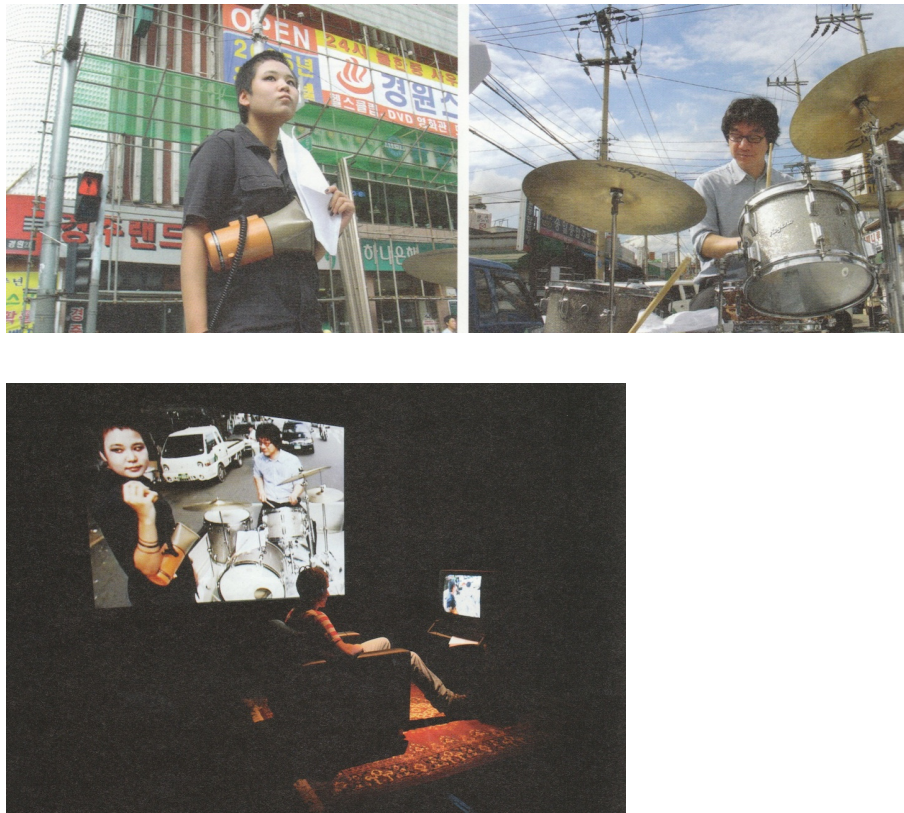


Figure 54 Lim Minouk, *New Town Ghost*, 2007, video still images.

²⁷³ Ashley Rawlings, "Almanac (Korea, South)," *Art Asia Pacific VI* (2011). 143.

CONCLUSIONS

It is now sometimes difficult to identify any Korean elements at all in the works of the younger generation, who have adopted a truly global approach and whose works stand up to comparison with the most innovative artists worldwide.

Jane Portal 2000²⁷⁴

Although I am from East Asia, I have been working and showing my art in Europe as well as Asia for a long time. My expression is undoubtedly based on a mixture of East Asian thinking, European methods, my own individual character, and other factors. I do not represent East Asia any more than European artists represent Europe. What is important is not a person's early background, but the concrete reality shared by self and other. What matters is whether the artworks and writings that appear before us deal with issues that are relevant in today's urban society and whether they are contemporary statements that transcend ethnic, geographical, religious, and ideological barriers.

Lee Ufan 2004²⁷⁵

The three Korean art practices examined in this thesis, of Lee Ufan, Lee Bul and flyingCity, have travelled a path beyond Modernism, similar though not the same as that trodden by Western artists, but against a cultural, political and economic backdrop unknown in the West. From 1915, Koreans experienced times of convulsive social change: suffering conquest, colonialism, dictatorship, poverty, economic collapse, the beginnings of democracy and now prosperity. This was much more acute than that experienced in the West and the impetus from the energy and scope of change fuelled dramatic artistic progress and expression. To the traditional

²⁷⁴ Portal, *Korea: Art and Archaeology*. 191.

²⁷⁵ Lee, *Lee Ufan: The Art of Encounter*. 241.

East Asian and Korean focus of art on the beauty of nature was added keen examination of the newly created urban environment. The shifts in the relationship of viewer, object, artist and environment manifested in much Post-Modernist art were embraced by these particular Korean art practices, as they reflected on their rapidly changing world. Against the background of their extreme history and in this evolving setting, the question arises whether they are making art that can still be identified as ‘Korean,’ and to what extent the viewer requires an understanding of the East Asian context. More significant, however, is the artists’ consciousness of their place in a global art world.

As Lee Ufan argues, in the epigraph above, what matters is not the artist’s nationality or ethnic background but rather the encounter between ‘self and other’ and the relevance of the issues dealt with in the artwork or writing. He is primarily interested in setting up the ‘encounter’ between the viewer, the artwork and the artist. He is acutely aware of the international context, as his theoretical writings demonstrate.

Lee Bul is also very aware of the international art world and by her residencies inhabits it. Her later work (after 1995) is more ‘universal,’ with multiple references to Western art history, literature and philosophy, or to popular culture.

For flyingCity, Seoul is the subject of their work, and the history, politics and economy of Korea is the context. The viewer certainly benefits from some knowledge of Seoul. However, their work is free of exoticism or traditional East Asian allusions, or of any imperative to promote a ‘Korean’ view. On the contrary, there is a quest for global solidarity.

In the work of Lee Bul and flyingCity the viewer is a city dweller and the subject is the city. Cities have featured prominently in this narrative; from Seoul to Tokyo and to Paris with Lee Ufan and Lee Bul, and from Paris back to Seoul with flyingCity and their Situationist exemplars. This can be seen as a sign of the dispersal of the centre of gravity of the international art world. Typically, Korean contemporary artists are based in Seoul but

engaged in their various art practices globally. Contemporary art displays both globalism and regionalism, going beyond neatly corralled ‘otherness.’



Figure 55 Lee Bul, *Anthem*, 2000, video still images.

Lee Bul and flyingCity have moved from the traditional offerings of natural beauty or calmness to commentary on the fast-moving urban visual culture. They are concerned, in their different styles, with questions of utopian city planning and dystopic futures. Devenport says of Lee Bul’s work that: ‘These morbidly beautiful testimonies to failed perfection inhabit the rupture between artifice and nature.’²⁷⁶

In his writings Lee Ufan expresses his awareness of tensions between the natural and the artificial. These tensions are expressed physically in the materials of his three-dimensional works; rocks, sourced locally, placed alongside manufactured steel plate. In these could be seen, in microcosm, a symbolic representation of the movement of human dwellings and workplaces away from the pastoral to the urban setting.

Lee Ufan, Lee Bul and Jeon Yongseok are all highly articulate and have produced an extensive quantity of writing, which gives insight into what they were aiming to do and what mattered to them. In their writings they are focusing on discussion of universal issues, rather than discussing ‘Korean-ness.’ When their writing or art-works explore the place of the viewer or

²⁷⁶ Devenport, "Lee Bul."

focus on the urban, these are not questions peculiar to Korean or East Asian art; rather they are characteristic of contemporary art worldwide.

These artists have forged a path to the global, as they have responded to the extraordinary social changes of Korean society. Their persistence and intellectual and artistic prowess have produced major bodies of work that deserve our attention. As the diaspora of Koreans around the English speaking world continues, it would be good if, in addition to the young being taught the traditional culture and arts of Korea, they should also have access to the work of Korean contemporary artists, such as Lee Ufan, Lee Bul and flyingCity. This thesis is presented in the hope of more awareness of Korean contemporary art practices.

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